Chapter Thirty-Four: An Exercise In Futility

I have to admit, although Ursula Grantz may not be a soldier like her older brother, the speed at which she assembled her firearm was promising. Dare I say, if she were a mage, she may outperform him entirely. There was a mad glint in her eyes, hiding under a veneer of an emancipated yet dutiful young maiden. In a way, her eagerness almost reminded me of Visha.

Flene, however, had only his officer's revolver. Clean, reliable but lacking the firepower of Grantz's machine pistol.

"Are we really going to engage in a skirmish aboard this train?" he asked awkwardly. "Should we be concerned with the other passengers?"

"That is a question for Albion to consider." I retorted. They're the ones who initiate this fight.

"Then how do we know who the assassins are?"

"When they start shooting at me, of course."

Right on cue, the area above my head exploded into a flurry of wooden shards and splinters as machine gun fire erupted through the train car. Flene was lucky for his fast reflexes, immediately dropping to the floor, while I grabbed Grantz and threw her down to join him. One more second of hesitation and her head would have exploded in the room. Grantz flinched erratically when she felt Flene's hand over her shoulder. A minor touch but she looked ready to dump her entire clip into his chest.

I recognized the pattern of the machine gun fire almost immediately.

Somehow, Albion snuck an MG 24 onto the train to shoot at me, and even more worryingly, they knew where I found refuge. Either we were talking too loud or Kaertnoc has already been compromised.

I got my answer when I shielded my head from the wood chips that rained over my ears and saw a small bug and wire hidden underneath the train seat. I immediately grabbed it to crush between my fingers.

Either Albion has tracked their seats or every compartment has a hidden microphone…Good Lord, does the Commonwealth not care about civilian casualties? I turned to face my allies all while I contemplated our next move.

"They'll blame this attack on domestic terrorists." Flene raised his voice to be heard over the din, "Illyria is a warzone, just like Hessen."

No shortage of violent bands of criminals to cover up this massacre…

"Are you a good marksman?" I addressed the veteran officer.

"With a revolver? I think I can manage."

You think or you know?"

"I know."

"Then do not hesitate to shoot. The gunner will run out of bullets eventually."

We had to wait until our bodies were coated in wood dust, shredded cloth, and cotton balls before the gun fire finally stopped to reload. In the pause, Flene bolted from the floor, aimed his revolver down the ruined rooms, and fired a single shot before immediately diving onto the floor again.

In the shallow distance, I heard the unmistakable cry of a man suffering from a bullet wound.

"Did you kill him?" I inquired.

"No." He shook his head, "I shot his loader. Though I think he was holding something else…"

Our peace was short lived when our room door was pulled open by one of three men wearing stahlhelms and the Imperial uniform. The Albish men had Imperial machine pistols aimed directly at my face. However, before they took their chance to end my life at that moment, Grantz opened up with her American Trench Sweeper and spent half her clip spraying bullets into their bodies.

The hallway was painted crimson red and decorated with bullet holes and slumped over bodies before Flene reached out to close the door.

Soon enough I could hear the familiar click of the MG 24 before it resumed firing in our general direction.

"I think we need to get out of here." Flene remarked.

"No shit!" I roared.

We either crawl into the hallway and risk getting shot or we exit through the exterior door and risk broken necks.

Being X…my mind raged within my skull. If you truly care about me, you would send a miracle right now.

In an instant, a grenade explosion occurred, silencing the machine gun and shaking the train cars violently as if it drove into an earthquake. Despite the sudden conundrum, it allowed us to catch our breath in the immediate stillness. We crawled back into our seats, careful not to expose our heads in the gaping sightlines, before considering our sudden fortune.

"We have to move now." I told them.

"Where to?" Grantz huffed.

"Third Class." I groaned, hoping the Albish won't follow me and endanger more civilians. I rather not be a bad luck charm to my would-be admirers.

With my luggage in tow, Flene took the lead with Grantz guarding our rear. She was a brave soul for risking her life despite not being a soldier like her brother. The power of fanaticism, I suppose. Though the chance I may have to explain her death to Vooren did subdue my newfound joy.

Soon, we were tailed by the assassins but Grantz kept them at bay, suppressing them under hails of lead, killing two more of my pursuers, as we advanced further ahead. I began firing my Luger to keep their heads hiding behind cover when she had to replace her empty drum magazine. I managed to nail an agent in the head in the skirmish before Flene grabbed my shoulder and shoved me to the first 3rd Class room he found.

It was not unoccupied, judging by the bullet holes and blood splatter.

"Look sis." A young male voice called out, a small finger was pointed at my face. "It's Argent Silver."

The boy, showing signs of malnutrition, looked to be no older than six while her younger, tear-stricken sister looked four.

"Lorrie told me that she has healing hands," he nearly jumped with sudden glee, "She can help heal mother!"

I looked at the ruined train seat and saw their mother's corpse. Half her head was blown away from the reckless bullet spray, leaving only her exposed tongue and lower jaw. She never got the chance to realize the rotten luck her family had.

"Your mother…is in a better place right now." I spoke, unsure how to let them down gently. "She left this mortal plane."

"But we are meeting father at Beograd!" the little boy protested, "Mother waited so long to see him. She can't leave now. Can you tell her to come back? Refund the plane ticket?"

"Grantz," With a heavy sigh, I turned to my loyalist, "Deal with them please."

I looked at Flene who stuck his head out the doorway to fire another shot at the encroaching assassins. Judging by their vocal responses, the officer managed to hit someone's leg.

"Shall we prepare for a last stand?"

"Most likely not," he replied as he closed the door. "They seem to be in retreat."

Though pleasant news, it did little to cheer the mood in our new haven.

The children started bawling while their mother's corpse remained undignified.

We could try reporting to the Beograd police but would they believe us?

If we told them that Albion had sent covert operatives to assassinate me, uncaring of collateral damage, would the Yugoslav King file a complaint to Londonium? My enemies are innumerous; no shortage of people to deflect blame to.

But the royal government can't afford to downplay this attack either. Trade is the lifeblood of nations; such symptoms of weak rulership will drive away potential investors and reduce public confidence in the market.

"We should move further ahead." I told Flene, "There's a chance that they haven't given up yet."

"What do we do with the children?" Grantz inquired.

For their sake, I hope their father is waiting for them at the capital. Their chances of a peaceful and well-meaning life are secured if he remains employed and a respected member of the Yugoslav community.

"Take them with us." I answered, glancing between the youth and the corpse. "Let's spare them this ghastly sight."

Civilians poked their heads into the hallway when gunshots no longer echoed into the night. The people that laid their eyes on me were both surprised and ecstatic despite the dreary atmosphere.

"Was there a fight, Argent Silver?"

"What happened?"

"I heard an explosion."

"EVERYONE!" I ordered, "Remain in your seats and keep your heads down. Do not leave until we reach the station!"

Thankfully, not every compartment had a passenger and we found an empty room to hide in. Judging by a sudden decrease in bullet holes, 2nd Class must have been devastated outright. I hope Londonium is satisfied with the results of their hit squad. At least Parisee had the decency to send one man to do the job.

As for the brother and his baby sister, Mordarian and Cecilia, respectively, were inconsolable. But their wails only joined the wider chorus of grief throughout the train as the survivors of 2nd Class were given the chance to fully comprehend their loss.

All those pointless deaths just to leave me unscathed.

Strange as it sounds, I prefer dealing with adults over children even though my career in my past life dealt with only the incompetents and the worthless. Children are loud, gross, naive, and horribly ill-suited conversationalists. I figured that Grantz would be better at calming them down but she seemed to be just as disturbed as they are.

Weird, considering how she had no issue gunning down three attackers.

Bad memories, she told me, how their dead mother reminded her too much of her own.

Poor Vooren, surviving man-made hell only to come home to a weak and dying parent.

I knelt in front of Mordarian and Cecilia, trying to be as approachable as possible, if only to get them to cease their tears. I spoke to them as I was speaking to Visha, only with dumber vocabulary to fit their restricted speech. I inquired about their father, his work ethic, his station in life, in order to distract their minds away from the haunting specter of an exposed tongue and esophagus. I asked what they look forward to seeing in Beograd, any food they wanted to try, any sights they wanted to visit…

"I want to see the king and his shiny crown." Mordarian sniffed, "I heard he has a big crown with a bigger palace."

"We both are alike then." I attempted to smile, "I also want to see the king."

Lord help me, this is going to be one long train ride.

"Good heavens, it's Argent Silver!" The children's father, dressed in a muddy Imperial uniform, stared at me with eyes the size of dinner plates. "But if you're here, then my wife…"

"She's gone." I broke the news. No pointing trying to downplay the murder. "Albion had made no distinction between civilian and target alike."

Fat tears began to form at the corners of his eyes. Rage. Denial. Grief. His face was wrecked by turmoil as he struggled to keep his body upright. He hugged his children tightly as they clung to his legs.

"Are you Germanian, by chance?" I asked as politely as I could.

"Serbo-Germanic." The father nodded through his tears. "I was a part of the Eighth Imperial Army, a Gefreiter. I fought under Field Marshal Mackenheim during the Dacia campaign and in the Magyar-Dacian War."

"A survivor, like me." I told him, reaching out to shake his hand. "Worry not, I will avenge this tragedy. It's me they want and I intend to give them all that they desire."

A flash of fury erupted from his eyes. "Thank you."

After watching the grieving family, one among dozens, depart from the station, I was gently tapped on the shoulder by Flene who then directed my sight to the royal police, the Gendarmerie, arriving to inspect the train and remove the corpses.

"If you still intend on staying here, you would have to reveal yourself to them eventually." He stated glumly.

"I intend to. You two should go home before either of you get hurt."

"If that is what you command." the man shrugged his shoulders before slowly departing from my view.

Ursula Grantz, on the other hand, was more adamant to remain by my side.

"I swore an oath to defend you, Argent Silver!" She tried to argue.

"What kind of oath?"

"Unconditional loyalty and automatic obedience."

What the hell is Elena doing to these young girls? Isn't Weiss supposed to be managing new members?

"Well," I huffed, "If you're so loyal and obedient to me, I command you to go home and…be with your family. Help your brother out."

In an instant, Grantz became docile yet agitated at my response.
"I…don't know how to help my brother."

"You did mention he joined the KSA earlier." I reminded her.

"I did but…"

"But?"

"I don't know what he is doing. He went to the Osterrian Alps and when I sent a letter to him, he told me he traveled to Pullska. When I asked him why he is in Warschau, he kept saying the same thing: 'The city is beautiful, The weather is nice,, and the people are very hospitable.'" She explained. "Even if I want to help him, I don't know how. I don't think he even wants my help."

How strange. I pondered.

"You should still go home." I told her. "You can help me by maintaining order in Germania. If you are content being a courier, I need someone trustworthy and diligent to deliver my letters."

"Please, don't send me away." Grantz begged, "I want to be useful to you. I want to help you succeed. I love you."

I looked away from her face. I did not want to see Visha at that moment.

This is not love, Tanya. It is a sickness. Of the mind. One that tyrants cultivate to build a personality cult. You should not be too comfortable with such adoration. A one-sided relationship.

"I can be your bodyguard." the young girl blushed.

"You?" I asked incredulously, "A civilian? Guarding a mage?"

"I completed a firearm training course in Silesia and you saw how I killed your assassins. I can hold my own in a fight."

I felt a creeping suspicion that she has sorely underestimated the escalation of this conflict I have with the Allied Powers. Forget the fear of getting kidnapped, they want me dead and they don't care how many innocents they have to butcher to accomplish it.

Besides, what would Vooren say if he knew what Ursula was up to? Would he lecture her or support her initiative? Most likely the latter. He is a war maniac. Just like Weiss and the 203rd. Just like Viktoriya…

Viktoriya…

I miss your coffee.

I miss your voice.

Snap out of it, Tanya. Focus on the present.

Not on past woes. Past regrets.

"Fine." I conceded to her insistence, much to her immediate joy. "Just…control yourself. Don't do anything rash or idiotic. And if you were to retaliate, at least notify me first. I want to know who you're defending me from."

She nodded most enthusiastically. "I agree to these terms."

"Good, make sure you keep track of your violin case at all times. Now let's meet our future allies and benefactors."

Lergen and Zettour promised me powerful friends here, after all.

I strolled up to the police inspector with my head held high.

He ignored me. The man IGNORED me. He was entirely raptured with the corpses and bullet marks that dotted the interior walls. He directed his men like a farmer driving oxen to gather evidence that could clue in on the identities of the murderers.

When I cleared my throat, he merely brushed me off with an offhand remark that women should not be involved in police business.

"I can tell you what happened, but I would like to speak about it privately." I remarked, hoping he understood Germanian, as I tried to break through his obliviousness.

"Run along, little lady." He repeated with a shallow groan, "I'm busy right now."

"Busy being an ass." I retorted, "I'm trying to help your investigation."

"Really now?" he still didn't turn his head to face me, "And what qualifications do you have?"

"That I was the intended murder victim."

"You?" That got his attention.

He stared me up and down, sizing me up, and Grantz tensed up when he stared one second too long at my chest.

"Ravna ko daska…" he grunted softly before suddenly eyeing my protector. "Very well, I'm intrigued. Who are you and why did they do…this?"

"I'm Tanya von Degurechaff." I whispered into his ear before presenting my signature smile, "And this was not a train heist but an assassination attempt. The conspirators did not care to respect Yugoslavian sovereignty over its guests and residents."

The inspector immediately froze in place, his mouth agape like a koi fish, before turning to face the train. He then looked back at me with a wry grin.

"I don't believe you." he chuckled, "You're not Argent Silver. She is in Osterry."

"What rumors have you been listening to?" I snapped. "I AM Argent Silver."

I showed him my medal, causing his expression to turn serious.

I could already see the wheels turning in his head. Perhaps he could direct me to his superiors who could then connect me to the deputies in the Yugoslav parliament. Through Parliament, I can gain access to the king and help him build a democratic state. The inspector rose to full height and gestured towards some of his enforcers.

Grantz grabbed my shoulder in panic and tried to drag me away. I assured her that everything is according to plan. Once I have done my part to honor Schlage's prerequisites, I can finally rejoin the Progressive Bloc.

"Argent Silver." The Yugoslav stated with odd pride as two men flanked me. "The Devil on the Rhine…you are under arrest."

What?

"I beg your pardon?" I replied, when the two officers grabbed my arms and slapped on the thickest pair of handcuffs I ever saw.

"For war crimes, of course." He beamed, feeling quite pleased with himself. "For Arene, specifically. And Dacia too. The Albion has maintained your arrest warrant after all."

WHAT?!

"I…"

"You can shut up now."

I looked to my left and right to make sure I heard his words correctly. The inspector may have spoken his words too loudly as all the civilians looked in my direction. A few with suspicion but many with sympathy and remorse. Some looked ready to intervene.

Even the homeless veterans balled up their fists and reached for broken beer bottles.

"But-"

"And because of Osterry, Parisee has also issued another arrest warrant on your person for the illegal overthrow of a democratically elected government."

"It was a revolution!" Grantz spoke up in my defense. "All revolutions are legally illegal in the eyes of the government being overthrown!"

"Now wait just a minute here!" I appealed to the man's good sense. "I can explain everything."

"Arrest the Germanian girl too." The inspector painted in Ursula's direction.

She tried to resist but she was too small and thin to overpower fully grown men. Her defiance was repaid when one of the policemen punched her in the gut with such force that she immediately threw up her last meal to the concrete pavement. His partner pulled her by her long blonde hair to force her to stand again. Her initial abuser further humiliated her dignity as a person by slapping her face twice with the back of his hand.

"What crimes has she committed to warrant brute force?" I inquired through clenched teeth.

"I'll figure it out later." The inspector shrugged as one of the officers kicked open her violin case to reveal her machine pistol. "All I know is that I'm going to get a promotion. Maybe even a raise."

His smugness was both humiliating and aggravating.

"You're making a mistake." I warned him with a hint of a snarl. "I came here to help this country."

A crowd of protestors was starting to form but the city's police didn't care. They dragged us to their militarized patrol car and threw us behind iron bars. All the while, I shouted constantly at their leader to reconsider his decision.

This was not supposed to happen.

I was supposed to receive aid. Protection!

Damn it! The capital building is right there! The royal palace as well!

Did Lergen deceive me? Did Zettour deceive me?!

No.

It can't be them.

They're too honest to do such a thing.

It would not be them.

Was this a set up by Schlage?

No, he hates Visha and what she did.

Not me.

It must be Albion. Francia. The Western Allies.

This was a trap by them.

The assassination squad was just a distraction.

I glanced at Grantz who sat across from me in this armored prison truck. She prayed most fervently for Being X's grace and rescue.

"What are you doing?" I fumed.

Curse Being X. Curse him for deluding his followers and leading them astray. Damn him for everything.

"Harden yourself." she was on the very precipice of weeping. "We're about to be raped."

The utter mournful and terrifying, sudden tone of defeat stole the words from my mouth.

I swear…

Do criminals and the accused not have rights in this era? Or is it just Yugoslavia?

Damn it all! Where are my contacts?!

Chapter Thirty-Five: The Start Of The Next Thirty Days With Ursula

Even in death, the Empire lives on.

The armored police truck hit a pothole on the road before continuing to lumber on like a drunk beetle. Through the barred window, I caught my first glimpse of my new temporary residence; The Beograd Central Prison. From my comfort in chains, I could discern that the designer was inspired by that Imperial fascination with the Roman era; a Neoclassical structure oozing a mathematical approach to oppression: immensely grand scale, perfectly symmetrical in shape, and utterly sterile of emotion. A prison not for rehabilitation but imbibes its inhabitants the sense of hopelessness and insignificance.

It was a monument built to display a raw state power over the individual. Nothing but battalions of guards patrolling under the stark shadows of blank walls of polished stone, though aged over the decades since its construction. Its Doric columns brought a sly smirk to my face, though Grantz continued to fear for her purity, as I pondered the reasoning why the architects even implemented such designs.

Why waste creative expression on a place meant to crush souls?

In spite of the supposed Anti-Germanianism that exists among the Serbs, they seem to enjoy the idea of rigid order and brutalist intimidation.

Perfect dimensions because why not? What better way to communicate to the prisoner that they are less than nothing by having their personhood be an affront to meticulously-crafted geometry?

Half of the guards who saw my face were stunlocked in various degrees of horror, surprise, and disbelief while the other half regarded me with utter contempt and apathetic serenity. Those men dragged me out like a sack of grain even though I was perfectly able to walk on my own two legs; they gripped me tightly, as if they feared I would run. I'm no rabid animal; I can cooperate if needed be. Besides, if I had caused a scene, the Yugoslavs would have every right to dismiss my intentions on arrival. They'll call me arrogant and naive to come to this kingdom and demand an audience with the king without ever considering why I come.

Despite the broad sun overhead, the corridor we passed was dim and the air felt cool and stale. The whole environment felt as if it had never tasted sunlight in the past 100 years.

But inside…was different.

Contrasting the outward sterility, I seemed to have stepped into another era entirely. There was a flavor of Art Nouveau, subtle but still present: whiplike floral motifs crept along the iron banisters like parasitic vines, sinuous curves soften the edges of door frames, and even the

occasional stained-glass window depicting Papal virtues filtered the harsh sunlight into something almost comforting.

For a maximum security prison, it was a sight of decadence.

As if the place was a hotel suite instead of a pit to sit in and be forgotten.

The legacy of the Glorious 10s and 20s, a faded memory and myth after the Great War, in full view. Back then, people thought that confinement demanded style, civilization had reached its peak, and that technological progress did not include new methods of mass murder and ruination.

Thankfully, the guards led me to a cell that was more in line with a proper prison: dark, windowless, and overall humiliating. At least it will spare me the cognitive dissonance of pre-war Romanticism. The more I stare at the walls of those faded murals of goddesses, flowers, and blooming forests, the more I can hear the jeers of those architects.

Look how superior our culture is, even when we break you.

Did they design it to soothe the minds of the prisoners?

I didn't care at that point. Not when more sentries arrived and gave me the rest of my luggage. I got clean dresses to switch into but they took away my pants for some bizarre reason.

It's the 1930s, by God! Women can wear pants! It's the modern era! I've been wearing pants ever since I was in the Imperial uniform.

"Pants make women ugly." The guard said in broken Germanian, "Dress better."

"What kind of reasoning is that?" I retorted.

"Good reason." he nodded before walking away.

Grantz was given a different cell not too distant from my own and judging by the silence, her prayer seemed to work. No one forced himself upon Grantz but I kept an ear out for her when night came. The night patrol did their duty like proper professionals and morning arrived without further disturbance.

I wouldn't call her paranoid but her first reaction to being arrested is to fear sexual violence being conducted against may indicate a problem in the Germanian police. If I get the chance, I'll have to inquire into her past encounters and write a letter to Chancellor Berning to launch an investigation into the federal police force.

No one should be afraid of the police for that reason.

Fortunately for her, she was let out on the second day though she was not allowed to visit me. Her case must have been dismissed entirely. Compared to my infamy, Grantz was just an afterthought; the Allied Powers would not care for her and, by extension, neither would the royal government. So she gets the privilege of walking away free.

Yet, most bizarre of all, she was willing to throw her freedom away to remain by my side. That girl demanded to share my cell to "keep me company" as if I would go insane from solitary confinement.

First of all, the cell has only one bed and it was meant to be used by one person. Second, Grantz has a life outside these walls. I don't want to be remembered as a bad luck icon, leading my admirers astray like sheep being led to a slaughterhouse.

The guards gave her the cell next to mine.

Goes to show how little this institution cares about justice. A prisoner is a prisoner, no matter the cause nor circumstance.

Eventually, once they examined my war medal and confirmed that it was not a fake, my habitation was upgraded immediately. My new cell, if it could be called as such, was the most luxurious room in the entire prison complex. Though a relic of bygone optimism, my new quarters had a high ceiling outfitted with a chandelier, an oak desk with ornate carvings, a bed fit for royalty, and a window that segmented into elegant glass planes.

There were no traces of any form of confinement here. No iron bars. No shackles. No sign of discomfort.

I read about places like these: specialized buildings to house failed revolutionaries and glorified dissidents too powerful to be executed and dumped in a ravine. Does the Yugoslav king expect me to be a meek, docile martyr for the Imperial cause, scribbling manifestos between meals?

It's almost insulting yet I found it rather enduring and brilliant. Compared to my apartment in Berun, this stay was as good as a five-star luxury suite. With so much immediate comfort, why would a political agitator want to leave?

Yet I am no agitator. Not now at least. They just want me to think, to wallow in my ideology, to play the part of the enlightened prisoner.

But to what end?

They want to hand me over to the Allied Powers so why haven't they done so already?

Thankfully, the guards were a lot more talkative and approachable. There is that certain guard that only comes in to give me lobsters, clams, beef, pork, and freshly baked chicken pies, I hesitated to eat these in front of him. I had a shallow inkling of foul play in these gorgeous foods. These were things I never had the luxury to obtain, even when I was in the dining halls of Berun where the opulence of the room can rival what I have now. Not to mention, this would be similar to the meals we would eat before the start of another operation. The revelation that he was a former Imperial soldier barely convinced me as I doubt that he could even reach such luxury at his Adriatic post.

Orion was a slightly old man, approaching his late fifties, with a graying beard and simple haircut. There were some scars on his hand and arms, probably from injuries in training or an occasional shell from the Illdoan fleet, while he stank of tobacco and alcohol. In the end, I relented; partly because of his insistence and mostly because the temptation to ask some questions was palpable enough with a groaning stomach.

"Did anyone pass any talk of my journey?" I inquired politely, when his younger partner arrived to return my luggage and medal as well as a compliment of pencils and paper.

"Not from what I heard, unfortunately." He shook his head ruefully.

Damn. I was hoping his senior status in the prison would give him easier access to the minor details of my confinement.

"Why can't they see I'm trying to help them…" I huffed, moving to start writing messages to Berning and Schlage.

"Help who? The government?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"It's…complicated." I sighed, "It's to get into the good graces of the Progressive Bloc."

"Those men? What did they tell you?"

"To come here and assist the liberals in Yugoslavia."

Now Orion got really confused before suddenly remembering to deliver a loaf of chocolate bread smuggled from the pantry.

"Argent Silver," He remarked, "There are no liberals in Yugoslavia."

"Can you please be more specific?" I gave him a side eye when I took the napkin-wrapped bread and gave it to Grantz. "What do you mean by that? Wasn't Serby a constitutional monarchy before it became Yugoslavia?"

"You would be right." He nodded, "But not anymore. No more elections or democracy."

"Can I say why? What happened?"

"The November Boycott happened! You should have seen what happened in Illyria! Communists killing Fascists! Fascists killing Communists! Judeans getting attacked by non-Judeans! Separatists fighting both Serbs and Imperial remnants! There were bombs happening hourly throughout November and December. King Alexios I declared a royal dictatorship afterwards to stamp out the violence."

Ah. So that's why Schlage wanted me to come here. The Treaty of Triano promised a fresh state for Europeans, a new life in a liberal society without fearing the tyranny of an authoritarian police state. The longer the people go without democracy, the less inclined they are to embrace it so long as they are given instant gratification and an endless supply of amenities to keep them drugged up and content.

Comfort should be no substitute for freedom and a strong man regime can only carry a society so far before it falls under its own weight even though politicians are like diapers: they need to be thrown out after a while and for the same reason.

"Orion!" Another voice came from the hallway. "You need to keep moving. You'll make the King wary of us."

"Sorry. I shouldn't linger too long."

"It's all fine." I told him before returning to my desk. One of the few reminders that I am in a zoo, an animal to be gawked at together with Grantz, as the guards must not be too at ease around me or else risk being seen as conspirators to bust me out.

The Yugoslav government already placed an immense amount of trust in me to reside here and I rather not go into that dark cell. Hell, they even allowed me to request music, the latest magazines, newspapers, letters and even visitors.

Though, the last part may be revoked.

I glanced out the window and saw a couple of protesters demanding my release. Impressive that the news traveled fast. Regardless, I returned to the desk and pulled out my draft.

Article Six: Involuntary servitude is prohibited. No person shall be held in bondage or subject to torture and enhanced interrogation techniques.

That last part was for you, President Bush. Even terrorists deserve human dignity, as do all criminals. After all, if the guilty and the accused have no basic rights, what stops a powerful government from declaring a random bystander a terrorist before whisking them away to a black site?

Article Seven: Freedom of Thought, Expression, and Conscious shall not be violated.

The Akitsushi may not appreciate their individual rights but if their history continues to march on in a similar path, then they will sorely miss it. Contrary to what Westerners believe, Japanese aren't drones. We have hopes and dreams too… Not all of us are blindly obedient to the Emperor. We just give him the respect he deserves as head of state. It is the war maniacs and the ultranationalists that abused his image to seize power for themselves in order to enact their samurai utopia.

The ability to say "No" is perhaps the most important indicator of freedom in any given society.

Article Eight: Freedom of Religion is guaranteed for all.

Personally, I would hope that society would move on from God and organized religion. Being X, because of his machinations in the Great War, has done more harm than good to his faithful.

I glanced up from my work to see Grantz sitting like a doll on the right side of the bed, seemingly lost in thought at the open book in her hands. Was it regret over her face? Regret that she did not listen or the fact that she had just wasted her youth spending God knows how long in Central Prison?

"You were right." I offered a mute smile, hoping that my concession would grant her some measure of catharsis. "I should have returned to Berun."

She barely reacted, giving me only a shallow nod before glancing down at the pages.

"What's wrong?" I inquired, with some iron in my voice.

Since she wanted to be at my side, the least I could do is not be a total stranger. I need someone I can trust; someone who could trust me in turn, so long as I remain in this…semi-hostile nation. A devoted, happy, bodyguard would go a long way to make this prison stay a lot more palpable. At least until my allies in the royal court found me.

"I can't read Serb." She replied, her blank expression revealing a thousand words of melancholic confusion.

Now that brought out some laughter out of my mouth.

"What can you read?" I asked her.

"I studied Francois, Albish, Magyar, Bohemian, Pullskan, Croat and Illdoan though, with White Russites in the KSA, I learned some Rus and Kievan." Grantz explained with a proud smile emerging across her lips. "Yet, I'm still having difficulty which Slavic word is which. Honestly, Rus and Kievan are very similar languages."

"Do tell…A polyglot, at that age…You impressed me."

Grantz blushed. "It's mild work. You should have seen my grandmother and great-grandmother. They knew practically every language in Europe - all 27 of them - and they were part of Chancellor Bismarck's Diplomatic Corps."

"Impressive lineage."

"Indeed, my mother…" her voice suddenly turned soft, "Well, my mother used to tell me that when the Empire united in 1871, they took a grand train tour throughout Central Europe; two among hundreds of thousands that year and they were the only ones who did not get lost…"

"Again, very impressive ancestors. I'm surprised that Vooren made no mention of this."

"Despite his erudite nature and loving heart, he was more like our father. A proper Imperial soldier."

I snickered, remembering how he started out in my battalion.

"But after Arene," Grantz continued glumly, "The only language he seems to speak is violence. Like all men after the Great War…"

After Arene… That comment struck me as odd.

"Do you believe I'm a war criminal?" I inquired, prompting her to suddenly shake her head violently.

I spotted her fingers gripping her text rather tightly.

"No. NO! I did not mean like that? You're innocent! You have the evidence to prove that…lethal force was necessary." Grantz then retreated into her book, "I…didn't mean to suggest that-"

"It's fine. It was cruel of me to test your loyalty so abruptly and after our train ride together. However, now that you mentioned it, you reminded me of your earlier comment…why are you afraid of the Yugoslav police?"

"Serb." She corrected with some measure of firmness. "As if I would recognize this farce of a kingdom."

"Farce?"

"Serbs are brutes, dirty, and lacking in high intelligence. A culture of shortsightedness. It's shameful how the Allied Powers have rewarded them for their contributions to the war effort - or lack thereof. I almost pity Rome because of it."

I set down my pen before sucking in my breath. A brilliant cosmopolitan revealing her inner discriminatory outlook…

Remain calm.

Maintain loyalty.

Dissect the root cause of her…hate.

"Care to elaborate?" I questioned. "They haven't…fulfilled your prediction."

"Because we have former Imperials as our watchmen." Grantz replied, setting aside her book. "This prison would be in a civil war if a Serb laid a single hand on you."

"On me? Does your life not matter?"

Grantz's mouth was frozen midspeech as if the words got clogged in her throat.

Her lip trembled.

Her eyes stood unblinking and staring far off into the distance.

Her delicate fingers curled into a cute little fist, nails digging into the flesh of her palm.

"Girls such as I, being raped by Serbs, are to be expected when under their custody. But you - you're Argent Silver. The Empire personified and Germania's Joan d'Arc. You're a holy virgin…"

Forget I said anything…I pinched my nose as I exhaled with renewed frustration.

"Alarming as that may be…" I gestured to the luxurious accommodations granted to us. There are homes in the Empire that had less material wealth compared to this prison cell. "You haven't answered the question. Why did you make that comment? Assuming that was the case, do you consider it somewhat unfair to label an entire culture as rapists?"

"Why not?" Grantz said coldly, "After all, the Serbs have had no issue portraying Germanians as barbaric invaders since unification. They had always desired Illyria as their core territory, fabricating false histories to justify their claims, and even now, they parade Imperial infrastructure and institutions in the region as if it were their own creation. A culture of thieves and liars."

"Grantz, if they wanted to commit violence to us, they would have kept us in those drab cells or worse, led us to the basement. Rapists don't typically house their victims with silk sheets and a fully stocked bookshelf. I would have to call your prejudices unfounded and even with the historic Serb-Imperial relations, fabrication is not restricted to them. Every nation, big and small, engaged in skullduggery. We did survive an assassination attempt after all."

My bodyguard became silent though she nodded slightly at my words.

"You are being unreasonably cruel towards Serbs." I continued, "It is important to at least study their government policies and socio-economics before we pass harsh judgment."

"Government?" Grantz challenged, "Poor management and lazy bureaucrats are merely surface-level observations. Their cruelty and propensity towards violence is far more fundamental; it's an aspect of their race."

"Race." I repeated dryly. "I would much prefer if you just said culture…"

"They are two sides of the same coin." she replied. "One defines the other. Culture is Race, Argent Silver. It's basic biology."

"Biology? Are you serious?"

"Yes."

"I severely disagree with that notion and its implications."

"How can you? It's been proven a dozen times before" Grantz paused suddenly, "What is the difference between Race and Culture?"

"You ask a very important question, I hope you're aware of that." I told her as I left my seat to gaze out the window for a moment. Already, I see two civilians protesting my imprisonment. "To begin, allow me to define these two terms."

"By all means."

"Culture is a series of behaviors common to a people in a particular geographic area or insular community, bearing traits such as a common language, common religion, and shared social

norms. Culture is acquired through repeated socialization and interaction between members of that area or community. Understand?"

"I understand."

"Race - well - it's a social construct. An arbitrary form of categorization to separate humans from other humans based on perceived physical differences, or in this world, perceived inferiority. Which I must state, is not true reality. Like paper money, 'race' only matters as far as society thinks it matters."

"So, you are suggesting…"

"I'm not suggesting anything. This is not an opinion. It is a fact. Race does not matter. It should not matter. The only thing that matters. The only thing that everyone should focus on is their wealth. The only color that should be prioritized is green: the money that belongs to the individual. If there is one thing I can agree with the communists, it is the massive wealth divide between the Junkers and the lower classes. When capital determines political expediency, ensuring wealth equity is what keeps a society stable, free, and equal. Not segregation of the races."

Honorary Aryans. Honorary Whites.

All rubbish and bullshit.

Japanese weren't white.

But we became white because of our Axis alliance with Hitler.

Japanese weren't white.

Now we are because we had capital to invest and the poor whites didn't.

I suddenly remembered back when I was at the bottom of the corporate ladder and had to kiss the asses of my higher ups. There was one elderly manager who cut his teeth doing business internationally and described his experiences being treated as "white." I didn't understand what he meant back then.

But I believe I do now.

Apartheid South Africa was truly an abomination.

"I'm sorry for my hesitation to reply." Grantz bowed her head. "I just didn't expect something so exceedingly radical."

"You expected a moderate? I'm sorry to disappoint you." I shrugged sarcastically.

How is any of this radical? A modern global economy cannot coexist with such xenophobic attitudes.

"No. Far from it, I joined the KSA precisely because I wanted radical, violent change. But this…why, you are going against 200 years of established race science."

"I aim to please. Yet, you don't look entirely enthralled."

"What you just said, to put bluntly, is very audacious. You are certainly a brilliant soldier and commander of men but to be willing to upset the established scientific consensus on race? Your reasoning remains inexplicable. Dare I say, I doubt you have taken a class on biology yet here you are, speaking as if you are a Naturalist!"

"Because it is all conjecture! Without needing to subject myself to their pseudo-experiments and criteria, I can still comment with utter sincerity to state that their methodology and epistemology is misleading at best and most certainly a complete bastardization of science at worst. The only thing that fuels their research is hate. Nothing more. Hatred of the Other. Of the Foreigner. Of the Impure. Perhaps, I can give the benefit of the doubt that these race scientists are merely jumping to conclusions but after all I've seen and heard. I severely doubt it. If you get the chance, read my book..."

Even as I said those words, memories of my last encounter with Zettour flooded back. I try not to feel ashamed but replaying his contempt towards Viktoriya again…

Visha, I should have defended you there.

I should have spoken my thoughts.

"I'm not saying that there is no biological difference between races, there are real differences, but the problem is that these 'race' scientists are concluding with their research that there is a race hierarchy. There isn't. There was no racial inferiority. There is no racial superiority. There never will be. There is just race. It is culture, our social morality, that defines us. I'd say equality under the law and under God."

"The Legadonian National Institute of Racial Hygiene would contest your claim if its board members were present with us. As would Dr. Hans-Karl Gunther." Grantz remarked.

"Good. I welcome it. Hell, I'll give them a challenge to prove their ideology has any merit: locate my heritage. Show to the world how Germanic I truly am!"

"Everyone is holding their breath…"

"Yes. Do you now understand why I found your earlier comment so strange?"

My bodyguard nodded slowly. "My apologies."

"I can still see some skepticism on your face. Trust me, this is not the hill you want to die on." I grumbled, "Besides, we are not just mere prisoners. We are also citizens of Germania. Yugoslavia would have to face the wrath of our country's lawyers if the guards present choose to violate us. And I suspect the King knows this."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because he would be an idiot if he didn't! Listen, Ursula, I am perfectly fine condemning an entire people in their involvement or cover up of an extraordinary crime as revealed in Brussels and the Treaty of Triano but it is done to reveal the hypocrisy of their attitudes. Not race. Culture. From my perspective, there is no definitive difference nor inferiority between a Francois to an Albishman or an Illdoan to a Serb."

"But…Dr. Gunther is a respected scientist of no small repertoire. He studied endlessly on the skulls of Balkaners and compared their ill-formed structure to the pure, clean skulls of Germanic and Anglo-Nordic-"

"Ursula, I swear to God, he is a conman." I nearly gave into the urge to go berserk. "He is a con artist. Instead of peddling false medicinal cures, he is selling you false science. So what if skulls have different forms? It means nothing. Absolutely nothing. This whole race science is another conman's game. You've been conned, Ursula! The entire education system in the Empire and Germania has been conned by men like Gunther."

Grantz nodded once more before silently moving to pick another book from the collection. Another Serb text.

"You stated you can't read the language so why do you redo your answer to my original question." I called out to her as I returned to my desk. "Why were you so afraid of getting…assaulted by the Yugoslav captors?"

"Serb." Grantz corrected again, though she squirmed in embarrassment. "It's because…of the Serbification of Makedon and Albanon in the pre-war era"

"Let me guess." I huffed, already foreseeing her answer. "The process was brutal, merciless, and thorough in its eradication?"

"More or less. The women were…"

"Taken as captives and forced to become prostitutes and breeding sows to Serb men?"

She nodded again. "Under the Directory of National Rebirth and Motherhood."

Oh…great. Where did I hear this story before? The South Koreans would not shut up about it. Not that I can blame them for their reaction for what we had done.

And…I suspect Europe collectively forgot the Serb atrocities when the Great War escalated...

"I suppose it is a small wonder why our Imperial brothers and sisters of Illyria are rather anxious about being under Serb rule." I huffed. "Regardless, you should have told me that earlier instead of covering it up with fake intellectual garbage. It does no great service to either of us. The reason for their reputation of violence is because the international community ignored and failed to intervene to put an end to the wanton killings and massacres of the Makedons and Albanons, thus enabling the Serbs to feel encouraged to conduct their 'Serbification' with impunity. Saying that Serb skulls are smaller and therefore, Serbs are less intelligent only serves to excuse their actions, not condemn them."

"Bulgariya was also not thoroughly pleased with Serb actions in Makedon given its ethnic claims on the region." Grantz added. "They still continue to interfere in Makedon through the use of terrorists."

Now I'm reminded of the Yugoslav Wars. I think I had come across local newspapers that dedicated a section to the violence in the Balkans. How 'ethnic cleansing' became a new terminology.

I should incorporate that into my Human Rights Bill.

If there is to be any peace and goodwill between neighbors, we would need to put an end to the normalization of ethnic violence. Otherwise, reprisals will only be met with further reprisals.

I certainly do not envy Chancellor Berning having to address the human rights violations in Makedon on top of the genocide in Dacia.

Yeah…

Since the Russites built its empire on a foundation of cruelty and terror…their success in murdering their way into great power status and becoming an Orthodox Christian hegemony in Asia… it must have inspired their fellow Orthodox brethren in Serbya to copy their genocides to enact in their conquered territories in the southern Balkans. Genocides then went ignored by the Great Powers of Europe who were more concerned with strong-man competitions over land, prestige, and resources than foreign populations. The collective apathy that the Steel Legion of Dacia took as permission to conduct their humanitarian violations on their soil…

And if Bulgaryia ever enters into an alliance with Germania, Pullska, or Magyarozag, they would have to keep Bulgar revanchism in check or else risk revenge killings in Makedon if Zofia retook

the region. And Allied hypocrisy over Brussels and Arene set the precedent that such crimes against humanity are irrelevant so long as the offending party is victorious in the conflict.

Damn it, Chancellor Berning does need my help in navigating this mess!

"Letter for Argent Silver." An Orion called out, pushing an opened envelope through the mouth of the door. Already requiring an impression that all communications will be monitored as undelicately as possible.

"Thank you, Orion." I walked over to pick it up. "Shall I be expecting more messages to come through?" I inquired as innocently as possible.

"For now." The old veteran grunted politely. "Though that could change at any time if the king commands it."

"Would I be allowed visitors?"

"Considering renown? Of course, provided they have reasonable credentials. It is standard unless the king says otherwise. We can't allow just anyone to enter here after all."

"Can I request newspapers?"

"Once per morning and once per evening. Though, we can only give you state-approved newspapers."

Better than nothing, I suppose.

"My deepest gratitude then, Orion."

After I turned away and decided to read the letter on the comfort of the five-star bed, I flipped it open - as the guards had already examined it - and pulled out a hastily written note. Grantz, driven by gentle curiosity, sheepishly sat next to me on the bed and leaned her head over my shoulder to read along.

Dear Argent Silver,
That was a fast capture! I was fortunate to have been dismissed by you so early to avoid arrest by the Gendarmerie. Regardless, provided they have not dishonored you so readily, I have requested to begin expanding upon my original purpose to aid you in Beograd. I know you have many friends in the kingdom waiting to be called upon but unfortunately, I am unaware of the full extent. Nonetheless, I shall work effortlessly to ensure that your imprisonment is more troublesome than your freedom in Yugoslavia. His Majesty will have soon recognized that your presence will be of greater use to him in court than be delivered to Parisee.
From, Flene.

How assuring yet so ominous.

"Do you happen to be familiar with Flene?" I inquired towards my bodyguard. "As in, know his schemes?"

"Unfortunately not." She shook her head, "Our partnership in retrieving you was strictly consummate. But if I had to wager, he may try to draw upon Imperial sympathies in Illyria. Despite their ambitions to expel us Germanics, Serbs need experienced overseers to govern their new kingdom."

"We Germanians are well known for being pencil-pushing paper addicts…" I hummed.

My first instinct was to imagine Flene organizing a general strike among the bureaucrats and workers to protest my confinement; using the threats of stalled productivity and delayed tax collection to ruin an already fragile economy to scare the king into submission. But the man was a military officer first and foremost, as far as I could tell, not an experienced rabble-rouser. He claims to have connections to Rudensdorf, popular though controversial, but how much does that matter to Illyrians?

Alternatively, perhaps he will find support within the royal government itself. Either a minister or confidant to at least speak of my merits. Maybe, Flene will work to get me an audience with the king as a form of final plea for mercy. Though Flene looked too low level to have the prestige or gravitas to accomplish this on his own.

Rudensdorf sent Flene to help me but did he notify Zettour? Lergen? Are they aware of the President's lackey in Yugoslavia? Given how close the three men are in relation to me, it would be unusually strange for them to not coordinate a plan of rescue.

In the end, I'll find out soon enough. I just need to keep my mind sharp and write to Lergen. He must be informed of my current predicament and get his associates in this country to form a political lobby, anything really, just to get an early release. If I get deported back to Germania, well, at least I have an excuse to deliver to Schlage as well as ask a few point questions about this whole endeavor.

Elena must also be notified as well; I must order her to stand down or risk having her do something regrettable.

"Grantz," I said to her, "You should start writing too. Contact your brother, your parents, and every other friend and associate you have. Let them know you're here and in need of support."

"Will the Serbs even allow us to call for aid?" she inquired.

I looked out the window and met with a luxurious view of the capital's skyline and just outside the outer perimeter and gate, the two civilians I spotted earlier were now sporting yellow

armbands and throwing empty beer bottles and small pebbles at the guards. Even at a distance, the black spot of the Imperial Dragon was unmistakable.

"They have to." I replied grimly. "Because in the end, either we are coming out free or there is going to be an angry mob coming in."

Beograd may be a center of Serb authority but there might be millions of former Imperial citizens from Illyria a day's ride away, furious at my imprisonment. That's assuming Magyars and Osterrians won't cross the border to protest as well.

For King Alexio's sake, it would be better for his kingdom if he just delivered me straight to Parisee and be done with me entirely. Any more delays and -

Damn you, Being X…

You want bloodshed to happen. You want a crisis…

After grabbing the first blank piece of paper I saw, I began writing a formal address to the Yugoslav King. He must be warned and pronto! He has no idea of what is to come.

Chapter Thirty-Six: At The Precipice

Days have passed, and soon enough, I am now nineteen years old. Being X celebrated my birthday by turning the rather pleasant view of my window into a scene straight out of a history book. What began as two individuals throwing debris at the guards had swelled to a crowd of thousands after weeks of resentment, perhaps tens of thousands given the growing rate, which certainly sent the garrison into a silent panic. It seemed every man, woman, and child from every corner of Europe was here. The young and old. Veterans and civilians alike. Orion believed that the Pullskans and Magyars had the largest representation due to how their languages were among the most common.

I appreciated that the guards had kept their discipline in the face of overwhelming numbers, especially in the capital, no less. And the Royal Police fared no better trying to escort them out. But what sure as hell was an escalation was when I saw a tank company roll in to reinforce the guards. A former Imperial Panzer IV A in full armament glory. Three machine guns and a cannon were aimed at the crowd. Complemented by a contingent of armored cars with equally heavy firepower and proper infantry. You would think such a sight would be enough to intimidate the mob into dispersion but that did not happen.

The strength of the Yugoslav state being displayed only served to agitate the crowd into a greater frenzy. Not helping matters was when the Serbs organized their own counter-protest to force the foreigners out of their streets. Thank goodness, the local police were not so incompetent as to accidentally draw blood. But Being X was scheming. He must have. He manipulated his loyal followers to risk getting themselves killed and mangled. And for what? For my freedom?

They can chant slogans, they can sing anthems, and they can shout my name but they cannot tear down these thick walls. Not when the king has a royal dictatorship. Damn you, Being X. You better not have intercepted my letter to the king!

God! Do these Magyars, Pullskans, and everyone else not have a life to return to? They need to go home to their families and careers! I can do just fine getting out of this prison on my own without the risk of collateral.

Suddenly, I felt arms gently wrapping around me before being pulled into an awkward, gentle hug. I quickly shot a glare at Ursula to not invade my personal space so suddenly. The lengthy time we spent together in that one bed made her oddly intimate with me. More often than not, I would wake up with her limbs wrapped around me like she was holding a massive teddy bear. In a way, it reminded me of Visha. When Weiss revealed to me that she was a grabber when she slept. Not sure why Ursula would feel so intimidated in this cell that she would need to hold on to someone for security.

And I certainly did not need the odd looks from Orion whenever he came over to observe me. Bodyguards aren't supposed to be that comfortable with their marks. It degrades their ability to

remain consummate and loyal to the position. Then again, I shouldn't judge Ursula too harshly. After all, she had the skills of a diplomat rather than a sentry. I assume that she was merely adopting what she already knew about getting close to a target.

"Keep writing your letters," I told her, trying to get her away from my little brooding session. "Can't afford to be lax now. They need to know what is happening right now."

Like a servant, she softly walked away to do just that.

I sighed heavily still. Just because the king granted me the privilege to send out messages, I grew the feeling he decided not to have me receive any replies; There was nothing from Elena, Nothing from Lergen; and nothing from Weiss, Zettour, or Rudensdorf. Even my letter to Visha produced nothing. Of the few connections I had left, I was counting on her the most to write back immediately. I will not even be surprised if the delivery comes by artillery fire just to make sure that I am aware of her cry. Or more manically, personally come to personally crumble down the concrete walls to break me out. She is the last person I know that would care about international norms.

But no dice.

As for the newspapers, mere propaganda pieces going over the glory of royal despotism or the demonization of Yugoslavia's neighbors. With the situation from the outside, those were very concerning things to read. Not as worrying though, as the news that Francia and Albion were clearly interested in "buying" my extradition to Parisee or Londonium but nothing came of it other than a few sly remarks. If I trust Orion's word completely, they were practically teasing me! Dangling the keys to my freedom from this prison-complex. I would dare consider these Allied remarks to be pointless conjecture because when I considered my personal value, I felt that the offers from the Western Allies were adequate enough.

Debt forgiveness, security guarantees, investment into the ailing economy, favorable trade deals, education opportunities for the Yugoslav students, the list goes on.

So why didn't King Alexios take the deal? If I were him, I would take it in a heartbeat.

Agh….

"Visitor for Argent Silver!" Orion announced coarsely. Even after hearing his voice for a while, I couldn't tell whether he was happy or disgruntled at the guest.

I turned my head away from the window before approaching the door. Much to my pleasant surprise, it was Milicent Caldwell. And here I thought the king wanted to keep me isolated.

"What brings you here?" I asked as politely as possible in Albish. "Aren't you supposed to be in America?"

A hint of shame swept over her face as she blushed. Her cheeks went crimson red when she saw Ursula and locked eyes with her. Both minds torn on what to say to each other.

"Greetings." Ursula nodded gently.

"Hello…" Milicent replied slowly, "About that…may I enter, Mr. Orion?"

With a polite grunt, Orion opened the doors before softly pushing her in and closing the door behind her.

"Come," I grabbed the American's hand. "Sit. I'm sure the guards will give us coffee and cake."

I can already sense my mood rising with her presence. Finally, a chance to tell my story to the outside world! No doubt my interview was published, read by millions and rehabilitated my reputation, and it's all thanks to her. With such success, there is no doubt in my mind that her superiors would want more.

After coffee and dessert were served by a staff member and allowing Milicent some time to adjust to this luxurious estate, I sat patiently waiting for her to speak first. I didn't care if Ursula was insistent on claiming her own seat at the table, switching from glaring between me and Milicent.

"I don't think I know of any prisons that provide such…comfort." The journalist remarked, gingerly stabbing a fork into a dark brown chocolate cake. "It's even better than my apartment."

"If it makes you feel better," I began with a smile, "You can ask Orion to show you where we initially stayed."

Milicent shuddered.

"They didn't do anything…dishonorable to you?"

"No," I answered flatly, shooting a glare at Ursula to remain quiet. I can't have her exaggerate the unpleasantness of the cells. Not when things are so tense.

"Ah, that is good to hear." The American smiled, "With so many rumors being tossed around-"

"Pay it no more heed. As you can see, we are quite content with the arrangement."

"You're not afraid."

"Should I be afraid? I am waiting to be released. King Alexios should have sent me to Parisee last week."

The reporter smiled awkwardly before turning her eyes towards Ursula. She opened her mouth as if she were going to say something to my follower, but I don't want any more distractions.

"Milicent, how was Brussels?" I inquired.

"Brussels? Oh! Yes. about that…" she tapped her fingers on the tablecloth.

"Were you…discouraged from investigating?"

"Oh no! Quite the opposite. The Lothierns were very forthcoming with their experiences with the Francois occupation. I was overwhelmed, really."

"I suppose that is good to hear. I'm sure you made your company rich from the publication."

Milicent bit her lip in hesitation. "About that…"

"Hmm." I nodded, smiling to make her feel more at ease. "I understand the stress; it must be overwhelming to be seen as indispensable to your superiors. Why, the stories I could tell you-"

"Argent Silver." The American spoke seriously in a hushed tone. "I got terminated from my position. That's why I'm here."

The girls flinched when the fork I held idle slipped from my fingers and onto the floor before my fist fell down on my slice of cake and shattered the porcelain plate underneath.

"Explain," I demanded coldly, grabbing a napkin to wipe the muck off my hand. "Why?!"

"My…boss didn't like what I wrote about you or about Brussels. He thought I wasn't harsh enough with my questions and that I was being too lenient with a war criminal. He doesn't believe that the Francois had committed any war crimes against the populace of Brussels. He…hates you for killing his brother, son-in-law, and cousin in the Great War."

"It was war," I said dryly. "How was it my fault that America wanted to get involved?! And how can he deny the atrocities conducted in Brussels-"

I sighed deeply. At least the interview and books were published. I can at least appreciate that accomplishment. But to fire someone just because you don't like the interviewee? That you think the questions aren't harsh enough? I feel that this should have violated certain labor laws in the US.

Unless those laws haven't existed yet…And if these laws do exist, it is a matter of enforcement. If Milicent is here and not in a courthouse, chances are, she has no strong allies to back her up, despite this being an easy case to win.

"I'm sorry for your loss," I told her.

"Thank you. Argent Silver."

"Tanya. It's Tanya. Don't you remember that we're on a first-name basis?"

Ursula's eyes shot up upon hearing my words.

"Thank you, Tanya," Milicent repeated. "I never regretted doing the interview and sending your book to the publishers."

"That's good to hear, but what are you planning to do next?"

"Well, I was hoping you could answer that question…"

I raised a curious eyebrow.

"I know you get expelled from the party…" She began, "But do you know anyone who happens to need a reporter?"

I gave another sigh as I contemplated her question. I can't believe I am doing this, but I have an idea of how I could use her.

"I have allies in Germania, which I'm sure you are already familiar with?"

"Right. I heard of Elena Muller. Is it true that she is a Judean?"

"Let's not mind that." I told her, "I just want to know if you're willing to go to Germania."

"Of course! What would you have me do?"

Staying mindful of any wiretaps and hidden microphones, I answered.

"I could use someone who can manage the mailbox at my workstation. I know it sounds mundane, being paid to sort out letters, but I suspect Elena needs the help."

Milicent was silent for a moment before glancing over to meet Ursula's eyes.

"I can handle that…but what if Elena refuses me?"

"I'll write a letter of recommendation. She will have to answer to me if she refuses…now, if you'll excuse me." I replied, getting up from my seat before moving to the washroom.

Almost immediately, I could hear the girls gossiping at the table like talkative hens. They really thought that they could whisper enough that their words could be consumed by the sound of rushing water.

"Do you…share the bed with her?" Milicent whispered.

"Yes…" my bodyguard, and I'm using that term loosely, replied. "But we weren't intimate if you're curious."

"Yet, the rumors were true…my goodness."

"How fast were the books sold?" I heard Ursula mutter.

"10 minutes after being stacked on the shelves! I timed it too!" Milicent grinned.

"Amazing…I can't imagine how much money she will make."

"I bet her husband will be very pleased."

"Husband? Tanya remains unmarried."

"Oh, my mistake then. Her father then."

"She is an orphan."

"Again, sorry…but, does Tanya have a bank account?"

"What do you mean?"

"You said it yourself. She has no husband or father, and in Germania, a woman needs permission from either to have her personal bank account. I assume the royalties go directly to her mailbox. Is that why she needs me?"

I found myself staring blankly at the washroom mirror.

Of course, I have a personal bank account! Where else did I store my bounties from my volunteer services after Magyarorszag and Daneland? And I know for sure that I was paid by the Imperial Army like any other individual, despite being a child soldier. I know I was not a slave.

Besides, I have Lergen. He is the closest person in my life who could qualify as a legal guardian back then. I can just ask him for permission. And have him transfer ownership back to me.

Out of all their time together during the Great War and beyond, Lergen has never seen his old friend, Hans von Zettour so furious. Absolutely, breathtakingly, exponentially furious. The young Defense Secretary was worried that the old despot was about to experience a heart attack before Rudensdorf.

Speaking of…

The President was still as stone and rather downcast. He was disappointed in his favorite war hero. His surrogate daughter…Well, their surrogate daughter.

All three men acquired Argent Silver's book and all three read together. Funny enough, the streets of the capital are significantly quieter now. It seems everyone is taking a week off to digest the contents of The Leviathan of Berun as even the communists and the vanguardists ceased their revolutionary antics for the time being.

Does she realize how much power she has? Lergen thought to himself as he gently closed the book and set it aside on the coffee table. A million thoughts shot through his mind like bullets being spat out by a machine gun; all of them confused, hopeful, and ominous. He looked ahead across from him to see Zettour cruelly rip out the pages of the manifesto like an old Papal priest seeing a translated bible. In a way, her book was heretical. It went against everything they had expected of her and more. Her words, pure and unblemished, offended him far greater than any Triano.

Was it pity in Lergen's throat? Sadness? The young general thought he knew of her character, but like before, he continued to be surprised. To think that he misjudged her…He wanted to believe in the good that she can do. And her ideas, radical yet profound, stirred a small fire in his heart born from his internal excitement and worry.

His entire life, Lergen wanted to continue the Empire's legacy, to be another cog to see the Imperial Project succeed. It was obvious he would identify as a conservative in the new Weimar Republic but with Tanya on a warpath, the young Preussian wondered if there was anything worth conserving. From Degurechaff's own words, the little Devil seemed hellbent on starting over. To create something new.

The new terrified Lergen. What could this new state accomplish under her guidance?

After Zettour's copy was torn to shreds by his aging hands, it was Rudensdorf who got up from his seat to toss his book into the fireplace. Zettour's servants scrambled to pick up the ruined paper before following the President's example.

General Zettour collapsed in his chair, defeated and angry, before clawing at his face in bare frustration.

"We lost control of the Devil." Rudensdorf grunted bitterly. "We should have been more involved in her life."

"Could we?" Lergen muttered.

"What in God's name is Weiss doing?!" Zettour bellowed, "Why hasn't he killed that mongoloid monster yet?! He was supposed to kill her in that putsch."

"What does…Elena Muller have to do with this?" Lergen looked at his ally.

"What do you think?" Rudensdorf huffed, "Elena Bottstein is the reason why our daughter is so…rebellious of late. Our daughter has been corrupted by Judean whispers that turned her thoughts against us."

"And Serebryakov!" Zettour roared, "That lecherous whore! Infecting Argent Silver with her disease; that disgusting Slav has unleashed a pandemic of queerness upon the youth. We should have been more assertive and surrounded Argent Silver with responsible men."

"And a husband." Rudensdorf set aside his cigar before glaring at Lergen. "I have a feeling that Weiss has been compromised by the queerfolk and made him…effeminate. He will need to be addressed later."

"No…" Lergen stood up, "You can't possibly think of me as the alternative! I am not earned by status as part of the traditional aristocracy yet."

"We have suitable candidates across the Empire." Zettour replied. "You're just the second most familiar bachelor face to Degurechaff."

"We need to bring Degurechaff under our influence." Rudensdorf continued. "The Judean and the Slav needs to be removed from the picture, permanently this time. We have the allies to do so."

Goering. Duester. The names went unsaid but were still understood by the Defense Secretary.

But before Lergen could speak, the butler entered the room to notify Zettour of a phone call. The caller was one of his Magyar allies and apparently he had some important news.

"I understand…" Zettour spoke over the phone, "Do what it takes to bring her home."

The two men sat silently as they waited for their friend to finish conversing.

"It's our daughter." he said with firm finality, "The Serbs have captured Degurechaff and subjected her to rape in their prison."

"Damaged goods." Rudensdorf grunted. "She runs off into the south on a fool's errand…at least we have another bullet we could use to kill this pathetic democracy. I only hope that her will is stronger than her captors."

"She will endure." Lergan spoke up, his head dizzy at the thought of Degurechaff at her most vulnerable. He never imagined her as a civilian before and certainly, he never envisioned her a victim of sexual misconduct. This is too surreal. The Great War made more sense than this.

"Of course she will, we shall consider it punishment for her insolence." Zettour stated, "As for you, Lergen, since you are trusted more by Bottstein and Serebryakov, get these two whores into the same room to be disposed of later. The sooner, the better."

"But what of Degurechaff? Won't she-"

"I trust our Magyar friends to come to her defense." Rudensdorf chomped on his cigar. "Same with our comrades in Warschau. Pilsud will not tolerate such dishonor."

A war it seems. An armed intervention to liberate Argent Silver. Is that what the President is alluding to?

Right in the middle of an economic crisis?

Was this the plan of the Progressives all along?

"And what will you do?" Lergen inquired.

"I will discipline our champion for disobeying our aspirations for her." The old Preussian replied, dialing the phone again to contact the bank. "Children need to obey their masters…disobedient children do not get rewarded for their stupidity…"

With a sigh, the Defense Secretary grabbed his book before turning to leave. His mind contemplated whether going home or returning to his office.

"Hello old friend, it is me, Zettour, and I have a request...yes…no…this is about Tanya von Degurechaff, her bank account…yes, I'm still her legal guardian…1113324067…thank you…suspend the account…consider it…parental safety measures…yes, thank you."

Chapter Thirty-Seven: The Old World Is Dying And All The Devils Are Here

Lergen wasn't sure what to make of himself, much less think of Tanya after coming across her published interview. After reading it again he set it down on his desk; The words didn't make any sense. He knew what she wanted, what she desired, for half her entire life he liked to believe that this was the case! Yet, none of his experience mattered. The Devil of the Rhine wanted to leave Germania, perhaps Europe, behind in search of better, more peaceful pastures. Was it madness? Despair? Curiosity of a life outside the Army?

For the past three years, Lergen thought, nay, he expected a militant uprising from Zettour's protege. A subversion of democracy. Anything that could demonstrate that she hated Triano for ending the bloodlust she treasured so greatly. The world has gone mad or, perhaps, it was the Devil who has gone sane. She complimented the Treaty of Triano and condemned it all the same in her book; practically guaranteeing Germanian irredentism to the Allied audience! Almost like a teacher given a stern but balanced critique to a student's subpar essay.

What is this madness?! This is not the Tanya that butchered hundreds of thousands of men with her artillery spells.

Lergen initially assumed it was the humiliation of her expulsion by the DDP that sparked her desire to forfeit everything but his own brain rebelled against the proposition.

Tanya would have overthrown the entire party leadership rather than accept her forced departure and exile. But the words on that newspaper remained constant: she sounded melancholic, with a dash of sorrowful hopefulness, throughout the piece. It was almost as if he never really knew her…

Maybe, just maybe, it was Lergen who has gone insane. How else was he to match his visage of Tanya with the words of her book and interview? Every time he closes his eyes, he could see that cruel, wicked grin of calculated slaughter and frenzied brutality. A little monster hiding in human skin…

The image made him shiver despite the bitter fact before him.

But that sight could not be conjured from reading her book. Lergen felt personally scandalous by how intimate she had gotten with her relationships; especially with Serebryakov. And certainly, the young Preussian felt a tremendous swell of pride in his chest when Tanya complemented his bureaucratic aptness and astute discernment. But that pride was deflated upon the realization that he had not given a kind word to the Devil of the Rhine, which was then matched by dread that she saw him as a model soldier and officer. A shining example of Imperial honor.

Honor.

What a strange compliment to receive from her.

The entire time, he was idolized by that little girl. That fact blindsided him to question his observation. Was he too wrapped up in his own assumptions to see it? How was that even possible? He wears glasses, for God's sake! How can he be so blind to her admiration?

And her ideas! Where did she get her ideas? Wasn't she educated by nuns? Lergen never heard of a progressive, liberal nun before but it was a more likely source than imagining Tanya being educated on liberalism, feminism, and progressivism in the trenches. He knew for sure that she was invested in writing her thesis at the time.

Did she get her ideas from the War Academy? It's extremely unlikely considering how conservative, even reactionary, the institution was. And it's not like he could trace her knowledge back to a singular philosopher or professor. When he seriously contemplated the origins of her theories on economics and politics, he wondered, and feared, if Tanya was just born with the ideas planted by God in order to influence the world.

Now that was a terrifying scenario. God using the greatest mage of the modern world to fulfill an unknowable, inconceivable goal? It would explain her mana aptitude and her exploits in the Great War and beyond.

Lergen sighed heavily, throwing the interview over Tanya's book as if he tried to hide the truth from the present. Who is she? What is she? Does it even matter? She wants to leave politics altogether. To go and settle down somewhere calm and peaceful.

With…Viktoriya Serebryakov.

The Defense Secretary immediately moved the interview piece to open the book to its dedication.

Oh Tanya…

Why?

Why did you have to be part of that population?

Those illfolk. The diseased and the insane.

You seriously cannot consider yourself part of these liberal degenerates upsetting the natural order between man and woman?

And with Serebryakov of all people? You can certainly find better love partners, even if you're so adamant to stay in the sapphic sphere. Cossacks are wild men with uncouth lives and a

heretical religion; these are not ideal partners for a Preussian girl like Tanya. The Devil on the Rhine deserves someone with greater respectability.

Lergen glanced at his watch before looking over at his other hand. His officer's revolver. Clean. Polished. And loaded with six bullets. More than enough to kill his unassuming guests.

Why, oh why, does it have to be him?

For Germania's honor, Tanya's purity, and the future of the conservative order. It does not change the fact that he is about to murder two women, dangerous women but young women all the same, in his own home after inviting them over to share a dinner together.

Should he aim for their heads? Or shoot straight at their hearts?

A more pragmatic man would have compromised the drinks and the entrees with cyanide but Lergen could not bear with himself to tamper with the food. Especially when he cooked it himself. His own grandmother would rise from the grave to tear his head off if he dared poison the family recipe of potatoes and shrimp. Potatoes and shrimp bathing in garlic, butter, chopped onions, and Asian spices; a homely comfort that reminded him of the good old days of a prosperous Empire.

No. Lergen must kill through the honor and integrity of his gun.

To make it easier to aim, the wine, liquor, and spirits should keep them intoxicated and immobile in their seats.

Right on cue, his doorbell rang.

Mustering all the courage he had in his heart, Lergen turned on the record player for Mozart before leaving the dining room to move towards the entrance; his revolver hidden inside his jacket inner left pocket. His echoing footsteps match the pounding in his chest. The door revealed…only Elena. Dressed in plain, yet immaculate clothing. Brown shirt upon beige skirt. For something so banal, it was opulent.

"Where's Serebryakov?" Lergen asked suspiciously.

"Good evening to you too, my dear Preussian." Elena snapped back with a small smile before stepping her foot forward. Her gaze met his eyes and challenged him for entry.

Lergen relented before closing the door behind her. Perhaps it was best to shoot her now, since she was preoccupied liberating herself of her trenchcoat - is that a dagger hidden inside her boot? As far as he knew of women's fashion, there shouldn't be anything inside a shoe that could reflect the light from his chandelier. Yet something was a bit shiny that caught his eye for a brief second.

"Did you come armed?" He inquired, trying to pass off as concerned than threatened.

"Of course," Elena rolled her eyes, "I'm rather important after all."

"Could you…set those items aside?"

The brunette stared at him in odd silence, almost like Tanya whenever she studied a map and planned operations, yet her brown eyes betrayed something more haughty. As if she regarded him as a mere charlatan masquerading as a king.

"Why?" she finally spoke.

"Are we not…friends and comrades here? I'd like to keep a reputation for being a steadfast host. I certainly believe that no harm will come to us tonight."

"I suppose you are right." Elena smiled, "The streets have been noticeably quieter now that everyone has some weekend reading plans."

"Is that the only tool you have?" Lergan replied as he watched her reach down to pull out a thin four-inch blade from her shoe before placing it on the nearest glass table.

"Yes." she answered in a manner that brought neither comfort nor certainty to the Defense Secretary. "Are you armed?"

"No." Lergen said immediately. His hand subconsciously felt the outline of his gun tucked away in his pocket. He breathed a sigh of relief when it looked that Elena accepted his answer.

She simply turned around before marching deeper into his house. The confidence and speed of which she navigated to the dining room made Lergen shudder at the possibility that this was not the first time she walked through his home. With her back facing him, the officer pondered taking the moment to brandish his revolver to fire a shot into the rear of her skull.

"Tanya was right about you. You really are an honorable and admirable man." Elena remarked as she glanced over the paintings, curtains, and velvet furniture before examining the food prepared for tonight.

Pan-fried venison paired with grounded beef and sliced pork dipped in fatty, peppered sauce. Toasted sandwiches dripping with cheese and filled with smoked ham and bacon. White cream soup with half a breadstick shoved inside. A massive bowl of sliced, squared potatoes and peeled shrimp bathing in an ocean of golden butter. Of all the varied drinks on display, Elena was pleasantly surprised that Lergen acquired Bohemian beer from the Sudetenland.

Seeing her soft smile brought shivers down his spine. Did he overdid it? This was supposed to be a private meeting yet with just one woman present, it resembled more like a romantic banquet.

"Which is why you're such a terrible liar." She tilted her head to give him a knowing look.

At that moment, Lergen contemplated pulling out his gun right then and there, blasting her face full of lead and unleashing a hail of blood over the table. Kyrieleis! The Defense Secretary spent two hours preparing the meals! He was famished from his own work and his stomach yearned to savour the fruits of his labor. Her blood would ruin everything.

"Please, sit." Lergen offered Elena a fine-cushioned chair, all while trying to ignore her comment.

But before she sat down, her hand immediately reached out to grab his coat jacket and opened to reveal his hidden revolver. The brunette didn't feel the need to pull it out yet; her dry expression told him everything.

"How dull and predictable." She remarked finally, grabbing it before exposing the cylinder. The bullets fell like rain onto the carpet below. "You're right handed, are you not? Try hiding it in the right side of your jacket for a change. You could buy yourself two more seconds of preparation."

"I…um…" Lergen sputtered, pulling away from Elena in an instant when she returned the empty gun to its resting place. "You're awfully calm about this."

"You're an army veteran, Erich. Not an assassin. But I'm open to an apprenticeship." Elena retorted, smiling like the Cheshire cat as she watched him bend down to pick up the fallen bullets. Hearing his first name spoken sparked a frown to appear across his face when he glared hideously at her. "Regardless, sit. Eat. Let's enjoy the night."

Hold on, I'm the host here. Lergen seethed in his mind yet he obeyed nonetheless, taking his spot at the head of the table.

"The food is getting cold, Erich." Elena smirked, "Eat."

"You first." He gestured at the food.

"Please, Erich, you're not as innocent as you like to think you are. After all, the food could be contaminated…"

"Nothing has been poisoned!" Lergen thundered in his seat. "You're not going to die from eating bread. Everything is safe to be consumed. No rotten potatoes here!"

"Am I to trust you on your word alone? We may be allies and associates but we are certainly not friends. At least not yet."

Seeing the brunette refusing to budge, the Defense Secretary piled his plate with meat and potatoes to the tune of his growling belly. He devoured buttered shrimp with great enthusiasm out of spite for the smugness of his guest, though memories of the 1910s flooded his mind in a wave of nostalgia, soothing his expression into a more relaxed stance. Only then did Elena reach over to fill her bowl with soup before grabbing a sandwich.

"A shame Viktoriya is not present to witness this." She said ruefully, "I know she will enjoy the bacon. Excellent work, I must confess."

"Oh, thank you!" Lergen grinned for the first time, "But, uh, where is she though?"

"In Osterry."

"Osterry? Why?"

"None of your concern."

"Viktoriya is a close associate with T - I mean, Degurechaff. She is absolutely my concern."

"You're the new head of the Reichswehr, don't you have greater concerns?"

"Viktoriya is the concern for the Reichwehr, as is every other member of the 203rd Aerial Battalion, something you should know very well!"

"Tanya, and to a lesser extent, Viktoriya, are perfectly reasonable and experienced adults. The dangers in Yugoslavia, however, we can discuss that at a later time. You shouldn't fret over them. After all, we are on the same side."

"And what side is that?"

"Why, the side that seeks to bring back unity and power back to Germania." Elena gestured with her hands for emphasis. "We've been at this alliance for three years now, why are you having doubts now? You read her book, didn't you?"

"Yes…" Lergen grumbled, biting down on a buttered shrimp. "The writing is certainly Tanya's but the ideas inside, however, I don't recognize them as hers."

"Perhaps it is because you didn't understand her at all." She shrugged.

"Don't be absurd!" Lergen grimaced, wanting to believe in his own statement. "I have known her far longer than you. I have watched her grow up into an extremely potent mage and a brilliant commander; if rather heavyhanded."

"Then her words should be of no surprise."

"Yet, I am. I'm sorry, Elena, but I must express my doubts in the legitimacy of her philosophy, if it even is hers to begin with."

"Are you seriously implying that our dear leader was regurgitating someone else's rhetoric?"

"I am trying to rationalize why Tanya von Degurechaff would do away with everything she has accomplished in the Imperial Army. You should have seen how furious Rudensdorf and Zettour were after they read the book! This is not the Tanya that graduated from the War Academy. This is not the Tanya that fought in the Great War!"

"War changes people, for better or worse."

"How?"

"That is something you should ask Tanya when you get the chance."

"I'm asking you, Elena! Since it's your role in her movement to be her intelligence gatherer…among other things."

"What do you want me to say? I can only tell you that Tanya decided to pursue her own path."

"Tanya was supposed to pick the path that we decided for her!" Lergen fumed.

"Who is 'we' that you speak of?" Elena narrowed her eyes. "As far as I know, I am not entirely welcomed to your private veterans' meetings."

"For good reason."

"Oh, what reason is that?"

Lergen withheld his tongue for a moment. "We, as her parents and guardian, think that you and Viktoriya are a bad influence on Tanya."

Her expression didn't flinch at all; merely stuck to that bored expression saved for her eyebrows raised in fascination. Only a small piece of laughter departing from her lips indicated her inner most immediate response.

"You believe that I'm influential?" She smirked.

"Too influential…" he added. It is important to keep Judeans at an arm's length. It's imperative to protect the status quo.

"Thank you for noticing. I worked hard to achieve that position."

"Do you not recognize that this is a problem for us? Those in respectable society? Women like you shouldn't exist in the first place."

"Please, elaborate."

Elena's eyes did not reflect the humor as her mouth. Though she laughed, it was as hollow as an empty tomb. It sent shivers down Lergen's spine but he faced worse. Without a doubt, the Preussian is downright terrified of his guest but he has faced Tanya's wrath before. How can this upstart half-breed compare to the angelic purity of the Devil of the Rhine? If he is not going through with his plot to murder, he should at least put this abominable freak back in her place.

"I'm sure you are intimately familiar with the opening dedication of her book?"

"How could I not? It made me almost forget about the interview."

"It's a marriage proposal, isn't it?" Lergen pressed forward. It was bold, brash, and seemingly perfectly in line with Argent Silver's directness. In hindsight, conversations with the 203rd company leaders have all but confirmed the close bond between Tanya and Viktoriya. They even confessed that they shared jokes that they were already a married couple during the Great War.

Good thing the men had enough foresight to keep it to themselves to prevent Zettour and Rudensdorf from hearing it. The two dictators would have found a way to send Viktoriya to the firing squad. Or alternatively, they'll just reassign the White Russy into a different unit before ordering her new commander to shoot her in the head while she slept.

"If it is, I think it is an honest one. Rather heartfelt, may I add." Elena hummed.

"This marriage is the end of Tanya if it goes through."

"I think of it as a new beginning."

"Annihilation."

"Ressurection."

"Profane."

"Beautiful"

"It's disgusting."

"It's natural love."

"How does that even work? Two women cannot produce a child together. Neither Tanya nor Viktoriya have the means of, well, conception."

"Perhaps you should change your perspective to see the joy of Tanya being in a loving relationship? Don't you want Argent Silver to be happy in her life? I think Germania would do a lot better if it was content allowing its citizens to pursue their own romantic interests."

"Within reason." Lergen huffed. "I want Tanya to find peace and stability but-"

"But?" Elena snarled.

"But not like this. It's just not natural. This is not how the world works! We can't have our war hero being seen among the queers. The Church won't allow it either."

"Then we'll just form a new church."

"Elena!" Lergan nearly ruined his plate when he smashed his fists on the table. "This is not a time for bad humor! Don't you realize what this means? Tanya could be excommunicated by the Church! Branded as a heretic if she goes through with it. She won't enter Heaven!"

"Won't enter Heaven?" Elena grabbed another sandwich. "The real consequence is not who is going to let Tanya enter Heaven, it is who is going to stop her…"

Lergen sighed heavily, realizing the truth in her words. As much as he loathed to admit, what the Devil wants, the Devil will get. If Tanya wants to become queer and enter Heaven after death, well, he could not imagine even God withholding eternal life from her. In fact, he imagined all of the Imperial soldiers that fell in the Great War would break down the pearly gates; Tanya the Valkyrie, leading an undead host to claim her seat next to God's throne.

"You should drink." Elena stated, after eating in silence for several minutes. "Sad hosts make miserable parties and I intend to enjoy this banquet that you have so deliciously prepared."

Was that mockery or a true compliment?

Lergen rubbed his temples before pouring himself some Bohemian beer.

"I-" he grumbled, "I just can't accept this fact of Degurechaff! Before the war, the queers had at least the decency to hide their shame behind closed doors, theatres, or in secret cabarets. But

now? They've all but flaunted their homosexuality in the open, inspiring others to follow their queer lust."

"You do realize that she has not been in any close proximity with queers for any substantial amount of time, except for me of course."

"My point exactly! The fact that she was corrupted with such speed! This should not be tolerated! It is against the natural law We're losing our common decency."

"Oh, what do you know of natural law? Can you even define that term?" Elena challenged, "From what I experienced, natural law is whatever dirty, corrupt old men think justifies their selfish ambitions and dogmatic approach in preserving their high status in society."

"Natural Law as defined by Scripture?" Lergen grunted, "Natural Law defined by men since time immemorial? That the only form of acceptable marriage and pure love is between a man and women. That natural law, Elena. The natural law that you seemed to be so determined to destroy because of what? You want to be heard? To be seen as anything other than you truly are? Because you don't like your position in life?"

"Yes, yes, and yes. Erich, you say it like these are bad things to aspire to. By your own stagnant philosophy, our people would have been better off never uniting in the first place and Central Europe would still be a patchwork of kingdoms, duchies, and city-states."

"You're impossible!"

"Thank you! Finally, acknowledgement!"

"You are leading Tanya down a ruinous path." Lergen accused, "We should at least control her worst tendencies."

"Why? Wouldn't it be better to encourage it? To foster it? To have Tanya soar into the sky?"

"If only it ensures she will not fall like Ikarus! We can't live among ashes. We can't eat soot."

"But we can eat our own flesh and blood." The Sudeten girl hummed, stabbing a piece of sliced pork with her fork. "Because God forbid women enjoy each other's company."

"I-" The Preussian groaned bitterly as his hand fiddled with his empty gun. "Why did I even bother doing this? There was no point in discussing it with you. I should just talk to Degurechaff directly and get my answers from her. I can't let her be ruined."

"She won't be ruined. Just believe in her foresight. For once, just allow Tanya to think what she wants for a wife."

Lergen looked up from his concealed gun to glare angrily at his smiling guest. "You mean, husband?"

"A strange way to describe Viktoriya as Tanya's ideal husband…" Elena waved her hand; her primary hand remained suspiciously absent from the table. "From my experience, there is something special about her as with the female form in general."

"Please, spare me from the details." Lergen stated, hoping his harsh tone could finally penetrate her facade.

"No." She smiled, "From what I know of your profile, you are also in need of an intimate partner. Pencils and paperclips make for dull company. Men, however, are very interesting and I know few who would want to be in my seat right now."

If Lergen looked in a mirror right now, he would see that he was as malcontent as a toad seeing a dried pond. "I do not want to know how you came to know such gentlemen-"

"They are gentle."

"But leave me out of your renegade behavior. And don't you dare introduce Weiss to such mentally ill people."

"It's already too late for that…"

"What? HE'S GONE -"

"To enjoy another pleasant evening with his fiance, no doubt doing a reading session." Elena stated, "Wilhelmina was quite the lovely girl. I'm sure she will make him very happy. Oh, I'm sorry…why bring Weiss into this conversation? Shouldn't we be arguing about who Argent Silver could or could not love."

Lergen shoved both hands into his face in agitation. The things he would give away to have Visha be in Elena's place. At least that White Russy knew her place in the hierarchy. At least she knew when to concede.

"Why is Viktoriya in Osterry?" he grumbled over his bowl of soup. "She has no business there."

"Of course she does. Everyone goes to Osterry. Who doesn't want to bear witness to the Alps at least once in their lives?"

"Is that the purpose? A vacation?"

"A spiritual self-discovery." She answered. "Her words exactly."

"How convenient." Lergen muttered before retreating back into the silent awkward eating. What is he to do with her? Shoot her? Send her away? Would Tanya be displeased? Elena has Viktoriya's goodwill as her protective shield and if the dedication is to be taken as bold and forefront, Tanya would sooner take her advice over his consternation.

If she didn't dismiss Elena then when he advised her to, would she dismiss her now? Especially after the brunette sniveled her way to be the new face of the Degurechaffian horde.

"Can I ask you one more question?" Lergen opened up, with the calmness born from dejection.

"Oooooo, 'can I ask you one more question?'" Elena grinned, fiddling with her butter knife. "Coming from you, Erich, that's very flattering. But, it's only fair that you should answer my inquiry first."

The Defense Secretary huffed. So be it. It's only one question.

"Very well." he nodded, "What do you want to know?"

"What were you going to say to Tanya von Degurechaff after you murdered Visha?" Not once did Elena blink after looking up from her plate and stared straight into his soul. "Instead of me hiding your invitation from Visha so she can leave early, I brought her here with me and you shoot us both dead in your dining room. And after that, Tanya comes home and you have to break the news to her. That killing the most important woman in her life is necessary because…just as Heaven is above the Earth, your beliefs, virtues, and ideology are superior to her ideals. Am I wrong?"

Lergen gulped. Why couldn't Zettour pick someone else to plot the assassinations instead?

"Imagine Tanya's face when I tell her what conspired tonight…" she drawled.

"She wouldn't believe you." He said quickly.

"Nor would she believe you. Tanya will believe Visha and Visha will believe me. Who can you call that Argent Silver still trusts? As far as I know, no one."

Lergen broke eye contact in compounding frustration and newfound fear. Argent Silver will believe him. Of course, she would. They have been in contact with each other numerous times during the Great War. Her memoir proves it as such. This dinner meeting was a lie. Not nefarious being plotted. Yes, Elena was just lying. Trying to discredit his good name. Yes! He is Tanya's greatest ally.

"Elena…about my question."

"Go ahead."

"If we agree to depart from this table alive and well, can you promise not to kill me?"

"No."

Lergen paled. "No?"

"No, Erich. I won't make that promise. All that filth you said earlier, if you truly meant it, then you're only going to sabotage her success. Her destiny. And I can't have that. You may be a difficult man to bring down, but you can be brought down. All I need is her permission or her indifference. I highly recommend adapting to our way of thinking before further difficulties emerge."

The young man frowned deeply. He'll live tonight. Most certainly, he will live tomorrow. But after a month? After Tanya comes home? Perhaps he should just shoot Elena right now. But what would he say to Tanya? To Visha? To Weiss? Would they even listen? Much less agree with his murder?

Lergen looked down at his revolver while a single bullet rested in the palm of his hand.

"Shouldn't you be worried about Tanya leaving all of this behind?" he said.

"A minor setback. I hope that her experience in Beograd will get her to reconsider."

"You're not worried for her safety?"

"Not yet. I plan to help her, after all. All I needed was one brave man."

Chapter Thirty-Eight: Our July Crisis

"Alex, my dear…" Queen Marija of Dacia caressed her royal husband on the shoulder. "Maybe we should acquire Argent Silver's book."

"I can't be having this conversation again." The despot gave a long suffering groan, trying to distract his busy mind with the sights of Wrhbosna and to steel himself for another publicity event.

Imprisoning the author and then reading her book would make him uncouth and idiotic. Finding out he may agree with her ideas? Now that is rather hypocritical. But damn, his curiosity for potential insight and his duty to satisfy his beloved wife's interest made him seriously consider acquiring a signed autograph. Assuming the little she-devil will be willing to entertain such a request.

Oh well, nothing that an extra chocolate cake can't accomplish.

Perhaps they can stop by a bookstore before they reach the hospital?

Compared to the Dalmatian coast or the dreadful Croatian homeland, the Bosnian interior was downright tranquil. A sense of peace that would finally allow him to examine his latest conquests without further disturbance.

Bosniaks are a simple people with simple minds and simple pleasures. Other than a bomb being thrown at his carriage and blowing up a crowd in the early morning when his car arrived, it seemed that the Bosniaks were rather content or apathetic to their Serb overlords. Of course, his security minister warned that the stupidity of the Bosnian clouded a low type of cunning. The bomb plot merely being an indicator.

As for the city itself, Wrhbosna was certainly a prize all on its own. Untouched by centuries of Rumelian rule, the trade center was clean, well maintained, and full of economic potential to Yugoslavia. Credit to the Germanians, they certainly knew urban planning. Hell, this city looked better than most Serb towns when it comes to architecture and landscape.

Perhaps he shall rename it after himself or to honor one of his generals. Oh well, a topic for another time.

"Why not, Alexios?" The Dacian queen replied. "We could learn from her. Understand her better."

"My love," King Alexios muttered as he bird-watched the pedestrians. A few ethnic Germanians shot the royal couple with hideous glares. The king made a mental note to deport these unwanted creatures from his nation in the first opportunity. "She's dangerous. She is an animal. A demon."

"I know…" she murmured, "But you heard how popular the book is. Even the Unified States Army was interested in it. Think of the potential of what we could claim from it. Military strategy, political theory…we could use that knowledge."

"I doubt it will be that useful."

Francia, Albion, and America. They're all selfish pigs hoarding all the Imperial archives and battleplans and leaving mere scraps to Yugoslavia and Dacia to scavenge through. God knows the Yugoslavian Royal Army will benefit tremendously from Imperial doctrine.

"We could use her." Marija suggested. "Let us bring our inquiries to Argent Silver directly and we can grant some concessions in return."

"No." He immediately shook his head in defiance. "I will not risk you falling for her devilish seductive charms. Regardless, she is already performing a role for the kingdom. If only the perfidious Illdoans stop interfering with the negotiations."

Why did God create such forsaken people?

The Adriatic coastline are noble Yugoslav lands that he rightfully conquered from the Empire. What claims does Roma speak of? Just because a few handful of Illdoans inhabited Istria and Dalmatia? The situation would have been pathetic if it weren't so untenable.

It was terrifying enough that a Great Power was preparing an invasion from the west, everything was compounded worse with the latest reports of a massive insurrection brewing in his very own home, at his center of power no less, and the latest news from his intelligence service that Osterry, Magyaroszag, Pullska, and Daneland are preparing for an armed intervention.

All because of one stupid, insane, and wicked little girl who wandered into his realm and got shoved into a concrete box.

What misery.

Lord have mercy.

King Alexios may have to end his tour of Bosnia early and return to Beograd to restore order and international prestige. Damn it all. For this to happen in such an inopportune moment. He can't afford to look weak! Not in the face of terrorists and foreign powers.

He should've gotten rid of that gremlin the moment she fell into his hands and that would have been the case if it weren't for the idiotic stinginess of the Allies. All that he requested, all that he desired, was the nullification of war debts and hopefully some industrial investments. What was $400 billion American dollars as payment compared to the greatest deliverer of death being

boxed and chained like a Christmas present to the Allies? After all, if she was so important to be sent before a war tribunal, surely they would be willing to pay for Yugoslavian service?

Just imagine what his kingdom could accomplish when he can start his kingdom's modernization early and that influx of capital! Advancements in the art, science, culture, and infrastructure! A modern state will rival Francia, Albion, Germania, and Magna Rumelia. His realm will be the envy of the world.

Alas, it was but a dream. The Perfidious Allies…shortsighted and covetous. Perhaps Alexios should replace his Foreign Minister for failing to reach a breakthrough. There should be no compromise over the imprisonment and shipment of Argent Silver.

The audacity of the Americans to haggle his price to $100 million dollars for her extradition…Don't they realize that he holds that devil's fate?! How cheap! How inconsiderate! Offering mere pocket change to be the one to hang the greatest mage of the modern era…

"Dear…" Marija grabbed her husband's hand; her fingers gingerly brushing over his knuckles. "We have to do something. The Devil cannot stay in Beograd forever. If we get her book, we could at least get a clearer picture on how to approach her and shield us from her youthful wiles."

"Marija-I…hmph." Alexios rubbed his temple with his spare hand. "I'll consider the proposition."

"Do it fast." She warned. "The sooner you have a plan to remove her from the country, the sooner we can stabilize."

"Your Majesty…" the royal chauffeur, Milorad Simie said as he turned his head slightly, "If I may…"

"Proceed."

"Why not employ the Devil of the Rhine? Why waste another month trying to negotiate with unreliable friends when we have someone who can reinforce your rule…"

"Simie…" Alexios growled, "Have you forgotten about the Croats? The Devil will lead them!"

"All the more reason to recruit her, Your Majesty. They will listen to her and she will listen to you if you present a deal in exchange for her freedom."

"But how do we know that she will keep her word?" Queen Marija inquired, "How can we be sure she will not lead the mob to overthrow the state and bring ruin to Yugoslavia like she had done with Dacia?"

"I…don't know, Your Highness. But maybe the answer can be found in her book. All I know is that she brought great success to the nations she visited."

"So we need to find out what she wants and give it to her." The King muttered. "I do not like this…"

"Neither do I, Alexios." the Queen agreed, "But better her as a friend than an enemy?"

For a few seconds, his mind warred between his doubts and hope. Is there a better alternative?

Either risk invasion by Magyarorszag from the north or by the Illdoans from the west. As much as he loathed to admit it aloud, the Devil does have use for him. Set her free and the protests would end. Make her a retainer and his neighbors will deescalate from their provocations. Promote her to a ministerial position and the Serbification of Illyria would be all but guaranteed.

The former Imperials in his lands seem to be devoted to her name…that loyalty he could use to earn their obedience.

But at what cost? The Devil is subdued. If he let her out, who is to say she won't form an army out of the Croats and Bosniaks?

Perhaps…he does need to get her book, if only to understand the inner machinations of that mage. He is king after all…what kind of king is scared of a little book?

Chances are, he may not need to acquire it. There has to be at least one person in his cabinet that has acquired the Leviathan of Berun. Yet, no dutiful king in history was so lazy that he required the interpretation of another man to understand a text that he could read himself. Alexios would not be that type of sovereign.

"I…appreciate your counsel, Simie." The king relented before regarding his wife with a hopeful look. "For the good of the realm…I wonder if any of these establishments have a stock to choose from."

"Considering you have not abolished it, Your Majesty, the book should be on the shelves though I heard that they sell out rather easily."

"Then let us get that with great haste. Move immediately, Simie."

"Now, Your Majesty?!" The chauffeur whipped his head around.

"Yes!"

The driver quickly opened up the local map to scan for addresses for the relevant business. Despite his experience as a driver, he remained unfamiliar with the layout of Wrhbosna. After

some rapid deliberation of the map to find a bookstore, Simile immediately turned left just when the cars behind, other members of the King's security retinue, were making their confusion and frustration known through their horns.

"Stop!" Shouted a Royal Guard. "Where are you taking the King?!"

"At ease, Captain Tobor." The King stuck out arm to gesture to the rest of the retinue to follow his car. "I decided on a detour."

"But-but-But what about the route, Your Majesty? What about the hospital visit?"

"The patients can wait for a few more minutes. There is an item I must acquire first. I will not wait for something so…mundane."

Since it was pointless to argue with a despot, the remainder of the convoy followed Alexio's car. The three vehicles in front of the train had to drive ahead to left on the next street in order to merge back with the retinue. All the adjustments went smoothly and the ride carried on without any further disruptions, however, the royal car came to a sudden halt at an intersection. Simie quickly consulted his map to ensure his directions were accurate but between glancing at the street names and the map, the driver felt he had missed a turn at the last light.

There should have been a clothing store on the corner to the right. Not a butcher and sandwich deli shop. Indeed, the fact that the three forward cars have yet to meet up seemed to confirm the chauffeur's mistake. But just before Simie could turn the corner to loop around, a man leaped out of the sandwich shop with a Germanian machinepistol in his hands.

The patron fired into the royal car before Simie could draw out his own revolver to defend his liege, drowning the vehicle in a flurry of bullets, all while screaming his lungs out in maniac derision.

"LONG LIVE THE REVOLUTION! DOWN WITH THE MONARCHY! UP WITH THE WORKERS' STATE!"

"Seize him! SEIZE HIM!" Captain Tobias roared, leaping out of his car alongside a dozen other bodyguards to shove the assassin onto the ground. "Save the King!"

The effort was futile. The royal car was dotted with bullet holes and blood, just like the corpses of the ruling couple.

King Alexios I of Yugoslavia, the Conqueror and Tyrant of Illyria, was dead.

Though he had thrown himself to shield his wife, the power of Germanian small arms struck true at her face and shoulders.

Simie was shocked. Paralyzed with disbelief and horror.

He glanced at the sandwich shop, whose clients were dispersed while the captain rounded up all the chefs, waiters, and waitresses for interrogation. Their faces were also marked with great dread and utmost terror.

He then looked at the assassin, subdued by the guards, filled with righteous fury and hatred.

"The workers will rise! The bourgeois will pay! Ulyanov lives again!"

Shit. The Chauffeur grimaced, looking back at the corpses. Who will lead Yugoslavia now?

The first thing Ori Kolhstamm noticed in the ocean of agitated souls was hearing half a dozen languages being shouted at the Yugoslavs. Bohemians with their beer kegs. Pullskans with their flags. Germanians with their chants. South Slavs with their songs. Slovaks with their signs. Magyars with their profanities.

Magyars are so magical. Just when he thought they had used up all their vocabulary cursing the Serbs into oblivion, new words seemed to be discovered by the second.

What the hell was a "Quadruple Powers Pact Pony?"

There were also Judeans with their…faith. Of course, there would be Judeans. There wouldn't be a protest without a Judean present taking observation or being part of the mob. Just as there wasn't a single Judean mom yanking their child by the ear to pull him away from the mass hysteria.

The sight would have lightened the mood for Kolhstamm but it only reminded him that he came alone. If only his father was here with him.

Father was always happy, or at least, he tried to be. He will always be loved by his son.

Kolhstamm pushed ahead, as he weavedthrough a sea of people, he kept an iron grip on his rectangular suitcase. He never considered himself a musician. An creative amateur at best, and despite being gifted the case by a close friend, he felt guilty bringing it all the way to Beograd. What song would he even play? What would he sing that has not already been performed?

Useless questions in the face of duty and pain.

Yet he could not help but feel saddened, alone and faceless in the crowd, as his eyes looked past the angry and vengeful youth to gaze upon the quiet dignity of fathers that guarded their children and faced the sentries with iron resolve. Oh, why did his father go missing? Did he not

realize the vast emptiness he had left behind? He could've just stayed at home and cared for Ori's mother and siblings.

He did not have to leave.

Despite the flood of anger, there were islands of laughter. Circusmen and clowns revealing effigies of the Serb King and his Dacian wife and hit with sticks by children. Sideshows that did not intrigue Kolhstamm at the slightest.

How can he laugh? Knowing what is to come? Knowing what was being left behind?

Despite being surrounded by smiles and solidarity, Kolhstamm pushed forward and only forward. Nothing else mattered.

The last thing his father told him before he disappeared was to smile for it was a beautiful day.

How can Ori smile? After living through eight years of war, six of which were spent in a permanent state of gnawing hunger.

How can Ori smile? When his own grandfather begged his mother to use his body as meat for the children to eat.

How can Ori smile? When he looked at himself in the mirror and saw his bones grinning back.

How can his father smile? When he saw that no matter how dangerous the battlefields were or how many comrades he saved or how many objectives he completed, he would be hated, scorned, and spat upon everywhere he went. It didn't matter he came home alive and distinguished.

Why does he smile so optimistically? Did he not realize that he had to flee the Russy Empire to avoid the Tzar's Cossacks? Does he not remember his brothers who were caught in another pogrom in Kieva?

There is no joy in this world. Perhaps there never was.

Whatever happiness his parents have experienced in the Golden Twenties will forever evade him.

It's not fair.

It's not fair that he had to carry the burdens of his family. It was not fair that he had to hold up the sky for his siblings to live under.

Ori had cursed the Francois for escalating the war. He cursed the Soviets for letting his family starve. He cursed the Kaiser for abandoning his people.

Most damning of all, he cursed Tanya von Degurechaff for being the false hope for fools without hope. Ori would know. He is one of these many fools.

Ori Kolhstamm missed his father. More than ever, he wanted to be held in his father's arms and be comforted by another white lie; that tomorrow will be better than today. As usual, the year promises to be one of punishment.

He had outlived too many classmates to not be able to foresee what was to come.

His mother told him to have faith in God.

Of course, Ori had faith in God.

He wouldn't be a Judean if he didn't believe but he also wouldn't be a Judean if he were not afraid.

His mother told him that, before the Great War - before the Bolshevik Revolution, she had known men that chose Death because they wished to escape this wicked and cruel earth that tormented their souls before devouring them whole.

Why was his father so happy? Did he really believe that the era of persecution and injustice was behind him? That the Cossacks and other enemies of the Judeans would not chase him to the ends of the earth?

How?

How can he be filled with hope when his family was threatened with exile once again? That the burdens will become heavier and bloodier than before?

Ori wanted to scream at his father. To force his hands upon the old man's neck to squeeze and wrangle any confession of doubt and fear.

But Ori's father was not here. He was gone. Missing. Not too long after joining the KSA with his sons and daughters.

Ori tugged at his yellow armband, marked with the sigil of the double-headed black dragon, the only sign of his true allegiance. An oath to Degurechaff.

He sold his soul to the Devil in return for his father coming back.

He volunteered to go to Beograd.

He was content that Reichsfuhrerin Elena Muller accepted it.

Just before the mob was Beograd Central Prison. It was reinforced by the Yugoslav Army. Complete with a fearsome looking Panzer III, flanked by two armored cars equipped with autocannons and machine guns, and pelted by rocks and glass bottles. The Yugoslav soldiers had bayonets at the ready, prepared to skewer anyone willing to breach the prison, near them were legions of policemen.

Kolhstamm stopped behind the first three rows of protesters before setting down his suitcase. With a forest of legs blocking a direct sight to his luggage, he opened it and pulled out his weapon.

With a Great War Faustpatrone in his hand, Kolhstamm immediately charged ahead, uncaring and unwilling to stop in his mission. After shoving his way into the front, he took a breath, aimed his explosive charge at the Panzer III, and opened fire.

The warhead sailed across the air like an eagle gliding through the sky in search of prey.

It was beautiful.

It was majestic.

Nothing else mattered.

The din from the protest was a mute as the grave to Kolhstamm as he stared wondrously at the device. Not even the shouts and screams from the Yugoslav soldiers reached his ears.

The tank immediately blew up in a geyser of flame, smoke and shrapnels.

Kolhstamm may have imagined it at the moment but it felt like the world had stood still. Like the end of his audition, God was present as his witness.

What he experienced in the next moment was a hot shock in his neck as a bullet tore into his throat and landed on his spine. A cannon shot then entered his chest like a bolt of lightning setting fire to a forest; shredding through his ribs and lungs before exiting the body to strike the person standing behind him.

The air thundered and a stormcloud brewed over Beograd as the soldiers repaid Kohlstamm's boldness with a hurricane of heated lead and shots. The guards fire. The sentries fired. The police fire. The machine guns fired.

Like dominos in motion, the protestors, the men, women and children that found kinship and commodity with Ori, fell to the ground with bullet holes across their bodies. Those further in the back trampled upon one another to escape the fury of the Yugoslav state.

Thousands fell like grass against a scythe, no different than their sons, fathers, and brothers who charged across no man's land and found Death as their destination, while tens of thousands more screamed and roared in unison. There was no mercy. No rhythm. Just the chaos and fear.

Chaos and fear.

Chaos and Fear.

Ori Kolhstamm; son of Ortho Kolhstamm, the heir to a baked goods company, connected to other clans of merchants and educators, with a waiting fiance at home to whom he did not know yet, and a dozen anxious friends and associates waiting for his return, died in a pool of his own blood. His blood mixed with the blood of Bohemians, Slavs, Slovaks, Germanians, Pullskans, and Magyars. Just his eyes stared wondrously at the clouds, as white as cotton and sugar, he felt more Judean than he has ever had before.

With his yellow armband, he hoped his father would find him again.

Chapter Thirty-Nine: Power and Privilege

"Well, that escalated pretty quick." I muttered darkly as I found the source of the explosion. I was about to hammer down to Ursula why the Legadonia institute's proposals are insane. Worse in fact than Thomas Malthus'. The sound, if it were not for its proximity can be shrugged by the mind as something from a distance.

Ursula visibly recoiled and staggered back. Her foot tangled with the chair and she fell down with it. She did a reverse somersault before scrambling on the floor and buried herself on some cushions. She covered her head with the pillow when her head popped out of the pile and made herself small as I stood.

Knowing the horrible state of the country, I retreated from the window before the Serb police and military replied to that idiot's audacity. And so the old adage of; 'The innocent shall suffer for the guilty' verified itself in its inevitability. The patter of the shots sounded like a defensive trench beating back an attacking wave, the screams were new. Then again, for most of them, the danger of facing death was dampened by a veneer of civility. If the army had just shown some restraint and just shot that boy It would have ended with a panic, but things can still recover. Fucking imbeciles, surely this cannot be the help that was promised to me? Where is Visha? Where was Flene?

I looked back at my bodyguard, who, recovered from her fright, kept her gaze..Thoroughly enraptured with the mass murder progressing before her. Ursula's face was aghast as she held her mouth with both hands. Soon enough though, she was able to peel back her gaze and our eyes met. Strangely enough, she seemed rather satisfied…vindicated even. Ursula…don't be like that.

"This does not prove Dr. Gunther's argument in any capacity," I warned her.

"But it does strengthen his thesis," she replied softly, her words carrying the iron baton of a challenger.

"Anyone would react with the same manner of panic and stupidity."

"Not you, however, and certainly not the Empire."

"The Empire lasted for over 50 years. All it takes is one policeman or newbie soldier to achieve similar results." I retorted.

"And Yugoslavia is only three years old and already has set a precedent." Ursula's voice grew a little bolder.

Does she take joy in affirming her prejudices?

"Why are you so eager to dehumanize the Serbs?"

"Why are you so eager to defend them?"

"You're impossible." I gritted my teeth

"Thank you," she smiled. "I hate to disappoint."

"Don't push your luck."

Just my luck. I glanced out the window once more to see the aftermath: nothing but corpses and bullet holes. There is no sure path for the King to wiggle his way out of an easy explanation to the foreign heads of state. Citizens of his neighboring countries have been murdered by his men with extreme prejudice. Their status will surely elevate this domestic incident into a diplomatic crisis. Budapestera, Wien, Warschau, everyone will want an explanation.

The worst thing is…Beograd has the right to shoot back. It was the crowd that attacked first with an anti-tank weapon and blew up an armored military vehicle, killing its crew. The protestors drew first blood; they could be counted as insurrectionists or terrorists. No one can attack a military station with open impunity and not suffer the consequences.

Yet, would Magyarorszag accept it? Especially after it faced another invasion by the Dacians, who terrorized Magyars in the occupied lands? Oh sure, we will defend our people within our borders to the last man, but we are utterly incapable of defending our citizens' rights abroad…the regency will sink in a tsunami of discontent if it chooses to remain passive and conciliatory to the Serbs. It's not like the royal dictatorship can prove that everyone present conspired to use weapons. It is doubtful that any evidence will be substantial enough to mollify the Magyars.

And what of Pullska? Under its military dictatorship? The same situation applies. General Pilsud will sooner invade Yugoslavia in retaliation than reveal any sort of weakness. Especially to avenge his countrymen.

Damn it all! Why couldn't they just extradite me to Parisee already? This massacre could have been avoided entirely and maintained peace in the Balkans.

I pounded my fist on the table. Damn you, Being X! Why can't you leave me alone?

And why haven't any of my subordinates replied?

I huffed deeply.

Let's assume that my letters arrived late. There are numerous ways for a mailman to be delayed, especially in this political and economic environment, and their plans of coordination

and execution took too long to be seen through to the end. It could be that the lone wolf operated alone. Just another ultranationalist revanchist looking for attention, using my imprisonment as a convenient excuse.

"Are you alright, Argent Silver?" Ursula approached me, gently laying a hand on my shoulder.

"No, I am not!" I fumed, "Another war could erupt any day now and my name will be dragged through the mud because of it. And my subordinates! They-"

"Are doing their best to support you in any way they can," she moved to embrace me, causing me to squirm out of her grasp. This is not a good time for a hug…

"You are not alone." Ursula continued, "Have faith in your men. They will come for you."

"How can you be so calm in this?" I inquired.

"I'm not." She hastily shook her head. "I'm terrified but I believe that God will deliver us a path."

I looked in the direction of the window.

"Of course." I remarked dryly. "Let us all depend on God in these trying times."

"Argent Silver?" I heard Orion call out, causing me to immediately turn and rush out of bed towards his direction, stirring Ursula in from her slumber. His voice immediately turned low and dark. "You will have a visitor soon."

"Who?"

"The Prince Regent, I believe."

"Regent?" I repeated slowly, suddenly burdened with a sinking feeling in my stomach. "What happened to the king?"

"Something bad happened to him." Orion muttered, "Nothing official yet."

Just when the bodies were cleaned up…

It had only been a few days! Can't Being X take a break?

"Pardon me, Orion." I did my best to smile despite the ill news. "Can I have today's newspapers? I have not received any information from the outside world."

"Sorry, Argent Silver." He shook his bearded face immediately, "New orders from the Regent."

"Can you at least tell me?"

"Don't push your luck, Orion!" A new voice called out. "He'll have you hanged."

I peered past the iron bars of my luxury prison to see another guard on watch. Unlike Orion, the man did not look to be another one of my admirers.

"You will be informed by the Prince Regent once he arrives." The second guard offered me this one concession. "Until then, he declared that nothing will enter or leave your room."

"What is the status of my letters?" I inquired.

"Do I look like a mailman to you?" He spat bitterly. "Ask the Regent."

"Orion?" I turned towards the elderly veteran.

"We sent them out." He assured me, "But I do not control who takes the mail."

I sighed loudly.

The idleness will be the death of me.

Alright, just take my questions to the Prince Regent. Judging by the circumstances, he has to have strings to pull in all levels of the government. Just play nice with him and I will be out of this country and back into the DDP. I returned to my desk to start reviewing my second draft for the Declaration of Human Rights, a grand scheme now a pet project just to keep my mind occupied during my stay.

My bodyguard got up from the bed to dress before moving to sit beside me.

No offense to Visha, but I almost wished she had the intellectual background as Ursula. Even her prejudices have the dignity to be kept inside. Not only that, she was rather intrigued by the idea of this document. Going as far as calling it "universalism."

Which was a dumb name. It's basic humanism. That's what it is. "Unalienable Human Rights." For everyone.

Yet somehow, for reasons I cannot fathom, Ursula has a very narrow definition of what "everyone" includes. When I told her that this will be an international guiding principle, she thought it only meant Europeans and the Unified States.

But when I mean "everyone," I do mean EVERYONE. Which means the Africans, Bharatis, South East Asians, the Japanese - the Yamato people I mean - and everyone else I do not know but also exist.

And for some reason, Ursula stared at me blankly, like she was confused. Visha would have just accepted my explanation as is but here, Ursula dared to challenge me. Me! Does she not realize she goes against common sense?

"It's one thing for Bharatis to be equal amongst each other," She told me with a straight face as if she was describing the color of the sun. "It's another thing entirely for the Bharatis to be equal to the people who conquered them so thoroughly. After all, sheep are the same. Wolves are the same. But scientists do not say wolves and sheep are the same."

If I ever meet Dr. Gunther, I might just kill him.

Yet.

Perhaps I shouldn't judge her too harshly…

If her recount of Imperial overseas colonial history is correct, and therefore could be treated as objective truth, as the textbooks I had read seemingly glossed over that facet in history, then I suspect the racism of the former Imperials concerning non-Europeans seemed to derive from ignorance rather than taught bigotry like anti-Judeanism. With no African or South East Asian colonies, the Empire did not have to engage with the doublethink lies Francia and Albion told themselves to justify their white supremacist rule. Yet because of that, the people of the Empire, if they wanted to learn from these foreign, exotic places, they had to either go to these colonies directly or read books and newspapers published by Albish or Francois.

When I pressed further, Ursula remarked how the Preussian King Frederick der Grosse was fascinated by Native American Indian culture during the 18th century yet all the books and articles he read about these tribes were from the perspective of White American settlers.

And since the average Imperial probably never seen an African or Bharati in person before until the Great War, his first impression would consider them as foreign invaders as the Allied Powers brought millions of colonial troops to the Western Front just as the Russy Federation conscripted millions of its minority Asian populations to fight on the Eastern Front. Combined with the occupation of the Rhineland and the Rape of Brussels…

I can't even blame Being X on this.

It might just be fortunate that the Francois chose to simply deny all accountability of the Rape of Brussels instead of shifting blame to their African troops. After being fed a century of propaganda about African savagery and the White Man's Burden, the Lothierns, Germanians,

and everyone else might just accept the scapegoating instead of continuing to hold Parisee accountable.

Regardless, the sentiment of suspicion towards the Africans and Bharatis by the Germanians will linger for decades unless both sides agree on a cultural exchange to reach a mutual understanding.

"Well," Ursula said thoughtfully, "I distinctly remember that before the Great War, there were Harlemites who played in Berun, Prag, Warshau, Amstreldam…they all wanted to play in the Empire."

"Harlemites?" I raised an eyebrow.

"Yes, Black Americans from New Amstreldam that played a new genre of music: Jazz. Have you heard about it before?"

"I do know it exists. Have you listened to it?"

She blushed red as roses. "Whenever possible before the war. I attended a couple concerts in Prag during Schicksalssaufen. I never knew that Africans could play so well. Though, my own grandmother hated Jazz. She said it was savage music from a bestial people."

"I see…" I nodded along slowly, "What does this have to do with colonial Africans?"

"Aren't all Africans the same? Just one race?"

"No…who told you that? Dr. Gunther?"

"No. From American scholars."

White American scholars went unsaid.

"You know what?" I slouched in my chair. "Let's talk about something else, I need to write a list of questions to ask the Regent."

Damn you, Being X! Just send him here already. I am ready to go back to Germania and hug Visha and send Ursula on a diplomatic mission to Asia.

"Argent Silver!" Orion's announcement woke me up early once more, "He is here."

"Finally," I muttered. The past 48 hours could not fly by fast enough.

I got myself dressed, hoping to appear as harmless as possible, before marching to greet my esteemed warden at the door. My bodyguard quickly followed in my first steps after shallowly brushing her hair and wearing a hint of makeup.

The Crown Regent was a narrow tall man. Standing perfectly straight yet not like a soldier but more of a statue in a museum. A royal obsessed over every detail to preserve a reputation among guests and fellow aristocrats alike. His uniform was garnished with gold laurels and stitchings, complemented by an array of medals. How much of it was earned through battle, I cannot tell for sure.

His face was long and narrow with a high forehead that indicated noble heritage rather than intellectual prowess. His eyes were deep and captivating, behind a pair of spectacles so small and useless I had to believe it was a prop. An elephant would have an easier time using a barrel to hide its body. When he looked at me directly, his gaze shifted from something cold and melancholic to red hot urgency and derision. He kept his mouth thin, like a line, before gesturing to Orion to open the iron gate.

"Your Excellency," I bowed, causing the Regent to shift uneasily. "I have been waiting for you. There is much to discuss."

"Likewise." He grumbled softly in Germanian.

"I have some questions to ask you. A few among many…" I continued.

"No time for that now. We have much more important business to take care of." He remarked, grabbing me by the shoulder and forcing me to walk alongside him.

"Wait!" I implored him as politely as I could. "What of my luggage?"

"The guards will take care of it."

"Far from me to question the integrity of your security, but I would be more comfortable to oversee the packing of my own clothes."

"Comfortable?" He sneered."Pick up your feet and move. You have no idea how your presence here has brought Yugoslavia to its knees."

"And whose fault is that?" I shot back. "If only my words were given the patience and consideration they deserve, your kingdom would have avoided the massacre."

"I'm not talking about the massacre…" he spat.

"What then?"

Instead of answering, he dragged me to a police car as if he was pulling a stubborn dog by the leash. The door was opened by one of the guards before I was shoved inside with handcuffs around my wrists. All the while, Ursula tried to follow me inside except she was stopped by the sentry.

"Not you." The Regent told her. "Go home!"

"I go where Argent Sil-" her protest was immediately silenced when he struck her face twice across her cheeks, the noise echoing in the courtyard.

"I will not repeat myself." He said sternly, "LEAVE."

With tears in her eyes, Ursula looked ready to stand her ground. It would have been impressive if it weren't for two massive soldiers picking her up and carrying her away. After that, the car roared to life before moving to follow the Regent's royal carriage. As sad as it was to see her go, at least I could now speak to the Yugoslav government. I hope I can at least gain a mutual understanding with Serbs.

Instead of the Francois Embassy, the convoy ended up in the gardens of the Royal Palace. Other than a battalion of soldiers marching up and down the road and hallways, there was a rather sizable contingent of men waiting at the front doors. All of them distinguished. All of them in varying stages of grief, anger and disagreement. The sight of my face peeking through the cutout was enough to send a wave of relief over them.

The back door of the truck was soon opened and my wrists were free of their chains yet the Regent still took me aside to whisper to my ear.

"Make yourself presentable." He warned, though the threat was entirely empty.

"Oh good!" One of the men grunted, "She is here."

"Let's just get this over with." Another fumed.

"What is going on?" I finally spoke up, wresting out of the Regent's grip. My defiance immediately sparked the guards to raise their rifles and aim in my direction. "If there is a regent, what happened to the king?"

"The king is dead." A third remarked grimly.

"And you assume that it was my responsibility?" I inquired. "That I was the one who gave the order?"

"Of course not! We made sure that no piece of paper entered or left the prison." The Regent huffed before immediately clapping his hand over his mouth.

Immediately, everyone present glared at the Regent.

"WHAT?!" I took a step forward, uncaring that the guards were a heartbeat away from firing. "YOU WITHHELD MY MESSAGES?!"

"The King's orders." Someone came to the regent's defence. "Before his untimely death. Patrick here was only doing his duty. We all were."

"So my letters are still in that prison?" I clenched my teeth.

But what of Orion? I suddenly thought. Was he disobeying the entire time?

"For now, they will be given to your…companion." Regent Patrick replied. "Let's move."

"Wait, who are these people?" I glared at the assembly of angry, sweating men.

They introduced themselves to be the Council of Ministers, the men in charge of the executive branches of the royal dictatorship. No doubt the past few months have been extremely stressful on their minds. And with the king dead, they have no prerogative to follow. Like headless chickens.

Once that endeavor was completed, we all went inside. If Ursula was fluent in Serbian, she could have taught me the language so I could eavesdrop on their discussion.

"(How do we get out of this horseshit?)" The Minister of Transportation fumed at his peers.

"(If it makes the Magyars happy, we can just blame the security guards on the ground.)" Regent Patrick suggested.

"(Your Excellency!)" The Minister of Internal Security protested heavily, angrily. "(I am the Security! I cannot, will not, allow myself to be the monster in this travesty.)"

"(We have to blame someone.)" The Foreign Minister implored, "(We can't blame the girl. The Magyars and the Pullskans won't accept it. And we can't use her letters against her.)"

"(Blaming the Magyars, Pullskans, Croats…is out of the question. Even if it was their fault for coming here." The Minister of War proclaimed. "We'll definitely be invaded out of retaliation."

"(Why can't we just blame the Judeans?)" The Minister of Education and Culture suggested. "(That way, we avoid blaming the Imperials for destroying that tank and ourselves for firing back.)

"(I like that idea.)" Patrick hummed, turning to the security minister, "(How soon can you find some Judeans?)"

"(Tomorrow, at the next meeting.)" He pondered for a few moments. "(I'll nominate a few scapegoats. We can arrange a couple of Rabbis to be hanged and we will tell the Germanians, Magyars, Pullskans, everyone, that what happened in Beograd was a false flag attack by a Judean Bolshevik conspiracy to bring down the kingdom.)"

"(Oh!)" The Foreign Minister remarked, "(Let's also blame the Ildoans too. To get Budapestera and Warschau focused on Roma.)"

"(That's a good idea.)" Patrick nodded, "(Alright, let's go meet the ambassadors. Where is the girl?)"

The Crown Regent turned around to place his hand behind my back before guiding me forward just as the government ministers followed us like a trail of ducklings. As we walked, he once again tilted his head in my direction to remind me to play the role of a rescued princess.

"And if I refuse?" I playfully smirked.

"I read your interview and your book." He told me plainly, "Unless everything you said was a lie, you will help us preserve peace with Magyarorszag."

"I understand." I replied, "But please know I came here for a reason…"

"To do what?"

"To help you. I have a mandate from my party leaders to assist in restoring democracy in Yugoslavia."

"And how do you think you can accomplish that?"

"The king is dead, right?" I whispered coyly.

His face was stone cold though a tinge of fear flashed through his eyes.

"Yes. By communist assassins."

"I can avenge him for you."

We suddenly stopped before two massive doors. Germanian was spoken on the other side though I could not discern the words. We both glared at each other. A million calculations ran through his balding head as he suddenly regarded me in a new light.

I smiled at him.

But before the guards could open the door, I walked forward to place my hand against the wood.

"Once I get the Magyars to stop their call to war, will you consider my proposition?"

The Crown Regent and all of the ministers glared at me, some of them trembling. Even the guards were hesitant to pull out their pistols.

"Agreed." Patrick nodded firmly, reaching out to shake my hand.

"(What are you doing?!" The Security Minister blubbered, "(She is called the 'Devil on the Rhine' for a reason.)"

"(My uncle was killed by communists!)" He shot back. ("My cousin is too young to rule. We have no better options to move forward.)"

"(She will destroy this country.)"

I didn't pay any more attention to their complaining as the doors were opened to reveal several dozen diplomats from the former Imperial states sitting in a avish banquet hall. The largest contingent of delegations were the Magyars. Almost immediately, everyone stood up with eyes wide open when they saw me.

Like anime fans at a cosplay convention, they immediately moved to greet me.

"Damn all eagerness, you Pullskans!" grumbled one Magyar. "Always trying to be first."

"Get off your ponies and start riding real horses then." The Pullskan winked.

"Her book was published in my region." The Lothiern representative smiled, "Obviously we should be first."

"When Prag goes sober." The Germanian one replied, "She is from Berun. We are first."

"Hold on," Said the Czech ambassador, "Why are we not first? Bohemia is the heart of the Empire. We built her the guns she used."

"She saved our country." The Danish diplomat remarked, "We still haven't thanked her yet. We should be at the front."

"She also saved our country." The Osterrian representative spoke up. "We should be first. She was in Wien."

"Don't I get a say in this?" The Slovak contingent of the Czech-Slovak State inquired.

"Gentleman…" I pinched my nose. "Don't we have more important business to discuss?"

"Right!" The Magyar ambassador quickly agreed, shoving his way to the front. "Are you well? Have you been hurt? Did any of the Serbs dishonor you in any way? What happened during your imprisonment?"

I turned to shoot a quick glare at the Crown Regent and his entourage. Patrick seemed especially nervous.

"I am unharmed. Anyone who speaks of harassment is false. The Serbs have been pleasant captors though I wished their attitude was more benevolent."

"That's good." The Magyar gave a sigh of relief. "I am Vass Marienburg. It is wonderful to finally meet you in person though I wished it was in better circumstances."

"Likewise." I sigh, "Before we continue on, I would like to know what happened in Daneland."

The Danes perked up.

"What would you like to know?" One of them said eagerly.

"Was there a putsch by an army general named Ugar?"

"Uh…yessss." The delegate said slowly. "The exiled King Albert IV returned to his throne after Ugar overthrew the republic."

I took a deep breath in, trying not to scowl, but it was clear that my attitude did not reciprocate their joy.

"It's fine. At least Osterry will have a new ruling coalition for its republic." I breathed.

"Uhh…about that, Argent Silver…" The Osterry delegate said sheepishly, before hiding behind the Pullskans when I immediately looked in his direction.

"About what?!" I said quite angrily.

"The exiled Archduke Karl the Blessed has reclaimed his ancestral seat in Wien in a royal putsch by General Theoneau."

Whatever inhabited my face, it prompted most of the delegates to return to their dining seats with the morale of defeated men.

"And what happened to Heidler?" I spoke each syllable slowly.

"He became the Chancellor to the Archduke." the Osterrian replied.

"When?"

"Four days ago."

"I was hoping for some good news…" I could feel my nails piercing the skin of my palms.

"There is good news." Vass Marienburg implored, "You're here. Still safe and sound. We can finally leave this all behind."

"Why though? My business here is not done." I told him.

He was confused. "What business do you have here that is more important than what you have with us?"

"Making peace between Beograd and Budapestera."

"Oh, that is easy. We already have a proposition ready in the scenario that you come to us healthy and strong."

Oh?

"That is good." I relaxed a bit. "What is the proposal?"

"In return to burying the hatchet, as one would say, in regards to what happened in Beograd between the two nations, Magyarorszag will cease mobilization in exchange for the safe return of Tanya von Degurechaff back to Budapestera."

"Budapestera?" I raised an eyebrow. "Why not have me sent back to Germania?"

"Because," Marienburg continued, "You will be given the Magyar throne. You will be crowned Tanya the First of Magyarorszag."

I stared at him blankly. This has to be a joke.

"I'm a minor nobility." I told him.

"Yet noble all the same."

"I have no land there."

"We'll give you one. The exiled Raven King was happy to hand over a barony to your name. It has servants, a winery, and a beautiful view of the Danube River and the Carpathian Mountains."

"But if you want a king, why not bring him back?"

"Your name was more popular than his." Marienburg explained. "And his heir is a two-year-old baby boy. Magyarorszag needs real leadership right now. Even Horvath agreed to a compromise."

"Compromise?" I questioned, "What sort of compromise?"

"In return for King Rupert II to give up his claim in favor of yours, he asks that the throne be returned to his dynasty after your passing or abdication. Unless you intend to have heirs?"

"I…well, I don't plan to bear children any time soon…"

"Then all is well!" The Magyar smiled. "What do you say? Ready to become a queen?"

I bit my bottom lip.

I looked at the Pullskans.

"Pilsud was adamant to crown you Queen of Pullska but he also believed that you would refuse him."

I looked at the Bohemians.

"We like the republican system so far but we wouldn't be opposed to an arrangement with you."

I looked at the Lothierns.

"If you want to be Queen of Lothiern too, we'll need to discuss it with the exiled Queen Wilhelmeina."

I looked at the Germanians.

"Just say the word and it will be done."

What scheme is Being X plotting now?

Chapter Forty: The Paths Not Taken

"Ambassadors, Your Majesty," I gestured to the Magyar whose eyes gleamed upon matching my gaze. "Can I have a private discussion with this gentleman?" I briefly turned away to regard the Royal Regent with innocent eyes.

He shifted as looked at me with discomfort, around the room, then back to me. "Here?"

"No. No!" I waved both hands and shook my head, "I would like to speak with Herr Marienburg outside." I glanced at his colleagues whose eagerness was naked on their faces. "Alone."

While the other delegates grumbled under their breath, no doubt miffed that they wouldn't be part of this talk, the Yugoslavs seemed to find my demand acceptable. It must be strange for the ambassador, becoming suddenly the target of everyone's attention, as he quickly followed in my footsteps towards the royal garden behind the palace.

After a minute of collecting my thoughts, I stopped in my tracks before turning around to face him. He went as still as a statue and his head whipped left and right to examine the thick green hedges as if he spotted a snout peeking through.

"Herr Marienburg," I began. "Allow me to state first that I am honored to be considered as the ideal candidate…"

"The choice was rather obvious." He smiled awkwardly.

My arms drooped "But this is all rather sudden."

"I understand. If you need more time -"

"I do have one more question, though." I said, my mind was distracted at the thought of Visha, hopefully she is still in a place where I can still pull her back up.

"Of course." Marienburg nodded politely."

"Am I expected to be married to a male suitor?"

He bit his lip at my inquiry.

"Traditionally, it is encouraged, especially with someone of your merit to forge a union with the martial members of our noble class. Encouraged, but with the compromise, it is no longer necessary for you. You can rule Magyarorszag alone if you so desire."

"And if I did choose to marry," I replied, "Would I have free reign to pick my partner?"

"Of course, that is your royal prerogative. But I must be forthcoming to let you know that Parliament and the people will make their opinions loud and clear."

I crossed my arms, "And what is the status of queer identity in Magyarorszag?"

"The queers? Why-" For a moment, the ambassador was confused. I watched him open his mouth to present his question only for it to snap shut, his hand covering his mouth as his eyes grew as large as saucers. His expression twisted into sheer disbelief and sudden awareness. "Kyrieleis…Oh, those weren't metaphors in your manifesto."

I narrowed my eyes. Did Richard edit my final draft without my consent?

"What metaphors?" I asked firmly.

"Well, uh, let's not talk about that right now…but your previous question…Oh, God…"

"Is the queer community integrated in Magyar society?"

"Define integrated." He replied, almost hesitant in his own request.

"Accepted among the populace."

"Define accepted."

"Marienburg," I huffed, "I know that you're a smart and educated man. You know what these words mean. I'm not deceiving you. I'm asking that if I become a queen, would I be able to marry someone of the same sex and gender?"

The Magyar looked behind him as if he worried of getting black-bagged once he answered. His face betrayed great discomfort and anxiety, sweat treading down his forehead. Swallowing his hesitation, he walked closer to my personal space and leaned down to whisper in my ear.

"No. You can't. Not officially at least. If you want to indulge in queer activities, it must be hidden. From both the general public and the Conservatives."

"What do Magyar laws say?" I asked. It was a stupid question to ask, given his previous body language, but better to confirm than to assume.

"Queer marriage is illegal; up to one year in prison. Well, it's two years now." He answered truthfully before chuckling weakly. "Funnily enough, the only people that spoke out against that law are the godless Communists, the occasional Radical Socialist, and…you. Heh, Horvath might have to suspend his persecution of the queers."

I smirked, keeping my lips sealed to stop a bit of laughter escaping my throat.

Oh Visha, if only you were here…

"I'm hoping you're merely speaking of hypotheticals…" Marienburg stated.

"Yes. Hypothetically." I responded. "I just want to ensure that we both have an understanding of each other."

"Indeed." he said slowly, "I assume the person you have in mind is a certain White Russy from the 203rd for this hypothetical scenario?"

"Do you have a problem with Slavs?" The way he talked reminded me too much of Zettour's derision towards them.

"Oh, of course not! Despite what you heard earlier, we Magyars see the Pulls as brothers forged in blood. We just like to remind Warschau that our horses are bigger, faster, and just superior in every way. The South Slavs are an eccentric but a pleasant and dependable volk. The Bohemian Czechs can make a great beer and they know how to celebrate. The Slovaks," He shrugged,"They certainly exist."

"Is that all the Slavs though?" I inquired.

"Those people," he gave a look of concern. "They are different from Imperial Slavs."

"In what way?"

"To start, they are a backwards people used to being ruled by despots; they don't care if White or Red. Dare I say, it's astounding that the Rus became the first communist nation in the world. I doubt that any of them knew how to read Marx though."

"I see. And by your standards, were the White Russy living in the Empire uncivilized?"

"I mean, they are at least smart enough to leave - hold on, Argent Silver, does this have to do with that White Russite? The one you kept referencing in your biography?"

"Her name is Viktoriya." I reminded Marienburg.

"Of course."

"Then say her name!"

"Do you intend to marry. . . Viktoriya as your 'king-consort' once you accept the Magyar crown?" He asked, seemingly afraid of my answer.

I immediately noticed he didn't use "if" in this question; as if my acceptance was already guaranteed.

Preferably, I would rule alone. That way, I will not be disturbed by anyone or anything. I only desired a safe and comfortable career and being a queen of a regional power is as safe a bet as ever. All I need to do is relinquish enough royal power for Parliament and a Chancellor to rule in my stead and I can spend the rest of my days surrounded by luxury fit for a royal. The softest beds, the finest foods, and the ability to travel anywhere around the world without going through airport security.

And yet, after everything we have been through in the Great War, it does not feel right to not include Visha into the scene. It doesn't feel fair to leave her behind.

She has her family, of course, but she is an adult. Not some child. I doubt that she is that comfortably well off living alone. We share an apartment after all. Isn't she a minor nobility in the Russy Empire? She qualifies enough to sit beside me.

Yet she is a monster. A cruel, wicked monster. A criminal of the highest caliber.

Then again, Visha deserves to at least know of this proposal. We could leave all this chaos behind. We could live peacefully together.

"If I say yes," I finally replied, "Would Magyarorszag still accept me as their queen?"

"I…cannot say for sure." Marienburg hesitated, "Again, you would need to keep it a secret. Perhaps marry a male suitor to suspend any doubts of your royal preferences."

"Is that a yes or no?" I glared at the man, causing him to crumple beneath my gaze.

"No." He replied ruefully, "But maybe there can be another compromise."

"Perhaps." I told him, "Until then, I have a higher purpose to achieve."

"Higher than being a queen?"

"Yes."

"You refused?!" The Crown Regent sounded surprised when I indulged in his curiosity after seeing Marienburg return dejected. However, I spared him the finer details and my outlook with Visha. I felt rather worn out after having to fend off the other ambassadors when they pressed for a more in-depth explanation.

I had never seen so many men with pink ears and blushing cheeks in one room. As amusing as it was, I had to make sure to have them swear to keep our meeting discreet. Zettour and Rudensdorf must not know. Unfortunately, I do not have Elena to act as their Sword of Damocles if they babble to the Junkers. I just have to trust their word to not speak of this offer.

A few pictures and some autographs and they were as obedient as children promised candy as a reward.

"Not refused. Merely postponed." I explained, as I followed him to the entrance of the palace. It was important to have my words be precise. Can't have this retirement plan slip away so easily. My eyes immediately noticed that Ursula arrived with my luggage. She looked awfully uncomfortable from the journey. "It would be rude of me to leave so suddenly."

"But we imprisoned you." He stated plainly.

"True, but we share similar enemies and suffer similar crises. I'm willing to overlook if it means the success of my mandate from the DDP."

"That's what this is about? Because of some damn liberals?"

"To make the world safe for democratic institutions. After all, isn't the purpose of the royal dictatorship because of the need to bring stability to Yugoslavia?"

"Yes." He answered. "But we don't seek your help."

"Really now?" I smiled. "And how does your government fare so far?"

"Poorly." He muttered, gripping his forehead in frustration. "God, I can't believe I'm considering this…"

"Think about it more." I implored him, "I bear no ill will towards you and your people. Just know that I have done what you asked and held off Magyar aggression. I only ask in return is to consider future employment."

I gave Urusla a wink to let her know I was still safe.

"If nothing else, I would like to be compensated with a temporary room and board, preferably one that qualifies as high living."

"I'll…talk to my cabinet as soon as possible about our alliance." Patrick grumbled, "As a token of my gratitude, I can extend accommodations befitting of your rank and service to Yugoslavia. Please, don't make me regret this."

"Worry not, Your Highness. I aim to please." I bowed in reverence.

While the Regent was discussing the details with his ministers, I found company with Ursula. Of course, I had to apologize for the uncouth treatment Patrick conducted towards her. I can't let Vooren say I was unfair to his family after all. She merely gave me a shallow smile before jumping to embrace me like I was her brother.

Gah! Distance please! Not in front of the Yugoslavs! Did she already forget that she took the role of being my bodyguard? As amusing as it is for a guardian to be infatuated with her dependant, there is a reason it exists only in the realm of fiction.

After prying her off of me, Ursula then offered a bag that contained all the letters that we had written during our imprisonment. No doubt they were tampered and obsolete. I dug through the pile with a heavy sigh, lamenting the wasted effort trying to alert my allies. The damage has already been done so no use crying over spilled milk…

Wait.

Where was my letter to Schlage?

I could have sworn I had my draft sealed in a brown envelope with a yellow stripe. My head looked up to stare at Ursula for an answer, fearing the worst, yet I felt my heart feeling a spike of hope. Did the Serbs actually send my message to the DDP?

"Sorry, Tanya." My bodyguard said meekly, "I was told that the prison wardens misheard the Regent's command and threw out your letters. At least, that's what Orion said. It must still be down at the bottom of the bin."

My fingers immediately gripped my hair, ready to pull it out by the roots, as a low gurgling cry of anguish crawled out of my throat. Out of all the messages that had to be lost, this was the last one on the list. Damn you, Being X!

"It's alright." Ursula embraced me once more. "Even if the Serbs are too incompetent to open a mailbox, we're free! You can go back to Berun now and tell Schlage himself."

I let out another huff.

Yes…if I only could be in two places at once.

"Oh, you still want to collaborate with the liberals?" she muttered.

I grimaced that she once again doubted my commitment to clearing up my ill-earned reputation. It was all a big misunderstanding!

Regardless, this will be a straightforward affair. Instead of planning events or writing speeches, I would just need to eliminate some terrorists. Quite frankly, I have an easier job compared to the regent.

"Pardon me for asking," I began, not feeling sorry at all for disrupting the silence, "But why are we back at Beograd Central Prison?"

Instead of sitting in the back of the prison truck, it was in a limousine by Mercedes-Benz. Fit for an officer or princeling. Ursula looked downright terrified upon seeing the venerable fortress again.

"It is a temporary arrangement, before you will be transferred to Wrhbosna." Prince Regent Patrick explained. At least he had the courtesy to accompany us. "To be very blunt, neither my ministers nor my guards were comfortable having your presence anywhere in the Royal Palace, much less confined in the guest room."

I rolled my eyes.

"I'm unarmed." I told him.

"And yet half a dozen armed men were found dead in the train you were traveling in as well as the fact that half of that train was missing. It was as if there was a bomb that went off in Second Class."

"It was self-defense." Ursula spoke up, trying to uphold my honor.

"'Self-Defense,'" He repeated incredulously. "Pardon me, I found that very hard to believe."

"You believe that I instigated their deaths?!" I growled. "I did not know these people."

"Not exactly." Patrick grumbled as he stepped out of the car and opened the door for us. "I'm just suspicious that between what happened in the train and the massacre in Beograd, you stand to benefit the most out of everyone's misery."

"A grave accusation." I grinded my teeth, "Where is your evidence and source?"

"My intuition." He replied. "And the words of my security minister."

In more blunt terms, he made it up. Okay, so this is how he wants to play the game. God in Heaven…save me from this paranoiac.

"How long will we stay here?" Ursula spoke up again.

"One or two days." He stated, "You and Degurechaff will cooperate with the governor and police chief of Bosnia to track down my brother's killers. I expect nothing less than the complete eradication of the communist scum."

"That I can guarantee." I nodded in agreement.

"However, you are also tasked to shut down any further secessionist or pro-Imperial rhetoric you come across in your search."

My bodyguard was indignant and wanted to speak but Patrick merely revealed the back of his hand slightly to force her into silence.

"This is not optional." He said sternly. "I don't care what you do to these Bosniak and Croat mongrels: bribe them, seduce them, manipulate them, or kill them…but Illyria must be pacified thoroughly so Yugoslavia can be integrated once and for all."

"Hold on," I raised my hand, "One miracle at a time. I only offered my services to avenge the King to rectify the bad impressions we had towards each other."

"And I am telling you that if you want to stay here and placate your liberal allies." Patrick roared, "You will do what I command! And I command you to put down these Imperial sympathisers with the same tenacity you promise to deliver to the communist murderers. Because if not, I will send you to Parisee instead."

"And who will avenge the regicide?" I inquired.

"I will figure out a method." He scowled, leading us inside. "Even if it takes a decade. But regardless, the hospitality here is far more welcoming than last time."

"Can I call upon the resources of the state to aid me in my endeavours?" I asked another question as I followed in his footsteps.

"Once you gather impeachable evidence of their whereabouts and hideouts, my men will accomplish the rest."

"Can I enlist independent investigators and the local population to aid me in intelligence gathering?"

The crown regent immediately stopped in his tracks before turning around to glare daggers at me.

"If this is a mad ploy to form an army-"

"Not an army!" I insisted, "I am unfamiliar with the culture and people of Illyria, just as much as you are, so I do need local assistance sympathetic to our cause to help put down these terrorists that disrupted the peace."

He merely continued to glare.

"Besides, what happened in Beograd has put the Illyrians in a state of worry, no doubt in my mind that the people in Bosnia will assume the worst if Yugoslav soldiers and policemen appeared. But if the investigation was a local effort, relying on compliance and mutual interest in keeping order and peace, the Illyrians will come to appreciate further cooperation with Beograd."

"I am listening…" Patrick muttered, suddenly leaning closer with growing interest.

"The carrot and stick strategy, so to say, Your Majesty. The Illyrians can either cooperate with me, as they know I seek to do them justice, or they can chafe under the authoritarian state. Once I demonstrate that the relationship I have with the Yugoslav government is fair and trustworthy, the people will have to dispel their paranoia of an oppressive regime."

The regent then turned away but I could already see the gears turning in his head.

"One battalion's worth of men can be hired by you." He stated, after a minute of walking silently. "No more than a 1,000 men under arms, understand. Once our business has been concluded. Your unit is to disarm and disband immediately and you return to Germania."

"Will these volunteers be equipped by the state?"

"No." He turned his head around to face me, "With respect, in the scenario you betray my trust and attempt to rabble-rouse a rebellion, I desire for the Yugoslav Army to be ensured a complete and total victory over you. And this includes computation orbs. Any Illyrian that gives you even a civilian orb will be hanged alongside his wife, children and entire village."

"So I have to arm my subordinates by myself?"

"Yes. I can't make it too easy for you to betray us. And don't even think of getting the Magyars or Pullskans or even the Bohemians to supply you. I will personally close the border of Bosnia if it comes to it."

I sighed heavily.

"I suppose that is a fair assessment." I grinned.

Once he left us back in our luxurious room, I immediately grabbed Ursula by the shoulder to get her to snap her back into reality. Despite the constraints, I have a few ideas in the making.

"Ursula," I whispered. "We will need to part ways once more. You are to find Flene. Find him and his allies and have them join me in Wrhbosna."

"What if he refuses?" she asked.

"Then forget him and go to the consulates."

"Which one? The Magyars?"

"Everyone."

"What should I tell them?"

"That we will need people who know their way around borders."

Ursula's face paled slightly, muttering something under her breath, before realizing my intentions. I must admit, relying on criminals such as poachers and smugglers would be a low blow to my career but needs must. It would be wholly unnecessary if Beograd was open to cooperation with its neighbors but the atrocity here left a bitter taste in too many mouths. Indeed, Yugoslavia would look weak if it needed foreign aid in a domestic issue and the government cannot afford to look any weaker.

"But about the recruitment?" Ursula said, "1,000 men does not seem enough to be spread across Illyria."

"Which is why we will also be recruiting women in our ranks."

Mothers scared for their children, wives scared for their husbands, if I could get them to cooperate and refuse refuge to the communists, they would make terrific eyes and ears in monitoring urban and rural activities. I could even approach the Papal nuns for their aid; I will need reliable bases for rest and recovery for my men in case of wounds from a skirmish.

I know I put a good word about my orphanage in my biography, my piety will surely convince them to break their neutrality.

Chapter Forty-One: The Dragon's Lair

"What do you think of her book?"

The sudden but expected question from Father Schugel jolted Visha from gazing longingly at the countryside. Despite finding an answer she could personally say with confidence after the umpteenth rereading, Viktoriya felt too embarrassed to dignify his question with that response.

It felt like she was living through time in episodic visions with an alien perspective that made sense of things. Important things, things that led her in a series of mistakes that had placed her in this situation. Yet despite the self-loathing that ate through her passage after passage, she could feel Tanya's helping hand plunging towards the abyss, in a place where she cried to her family, to God, and to Tanya that she is lost. Her thoughts swirled around her mind before flooding down her throat and settling into her stomach like a slab of concrete.

"Enlightening, I think." She muttered, her clenched hands straining on her knees as she sat next to the mad priest as they rode the train to Berchtesgaden. Thankfully, despite the early excitement of ripping apart a Rohrite with her bare hands at the initial train station, the journey had been, for the most part, tranquil. After looking about herself, Viktoriya found herself shifting on her seat with the silent gawking of the other passengers. "Truly, I am so fortunate to have her in my life."

"I hope Argent Silver was merely being hyperbolic when she talked of leaving Europe," Schugel muttered uncomfortably, glancing over a snippet of a newspaper that printed Caldwell's interview. "With the weather, it would be most untimely."

"She will stay," Viktoriya said quickly, despite what was written. Visha wanted it, prayed for it to be on the contrary. "She has to. Who else can restore order to the continent and avenge our honor?"

"There is you." He remarked, causing shame to bubble underneath her skin.

A foreboding wrongness shuddered in her entire being. Visha as Tanya's equal? The thought was sacrilegious. For half of her entire life, Viktoriya lived as a servant and a slave to the whims of the Major. To be elevated and upheld as a new champion was a feeling most unfeeling. Yet somehow, it was warming in a way.

The White Russy wanted to enjoy that sensation. After being spurred by her allies, to being regarded as someone special was a feeling she never realized she desperately needed. Right now, though, she was wanted. She was needed. But by all the wrong people.

At least, the people that Tanya would be displeased with Viktoriya was associating. A women is judged by the men in her life, after all.

But they were her brothers and sisters in exile… Kin before she found comrades who stuck with her closer than a brother. For if Argent Silver demanded Viktoriya to denounce her kin, it was no different than demanding her to paint her hair blonde and replace her mother's tongue with the language of Aryans.

Despite her distant relationship with her family these days, nothing is more important than family. No family is perfect, and their dreams were also, once upon a time, her own.

Knowing that, she also knew the weight the world had inflicted on her kin. Despite that, they are living with what they have in hand, serving whoever they can with their practiced hands when they serve the Tsar.

They're not hopeless. They're just…confused. They just needed our help too.

The world had turned twice and for the worse; The twin-headed eagle of the Tzar, and the black dragon of the Kaiser has fallen and the world darkened like the closure of the theatre curtain, now they are living in uncertain times that would not be far off from the time the Francois monarch was overthrown and their bodies rotted away somewhere on the bottom of a river.

If only her love could understand their struggle.

Or was it something about me? The rueful look she gave me went back before my eyes.

"Is there something wrong with me?" Viktoriya whispered, her mind felt faint, her hold softened, her arms went limp as she leaned back and looked at the ceiling with a stupified expression..

"Good heavens, of course not!" Father Schugel looked at her with sudden concern. "What makes you say that?"

"I…" Visha said dryly. "I don't know."

He looked at her thoughtfully as the outside world passed by. A rare form of peace could be seen when regarding the farms resting on rolling hills and white-tipped mountain peaks of Bavaria, yet it was no less virtuous than the warzone that existed in the cities. More than once, a red banner with the black swastika could be found flying proudly in the village streets. But thankfully, it was not omnipresent.

But how come she doesn't know? Why can't she answer? Her entire life, the White Russy carried herself with utter surety, and the Great War was no different. There was panic, confusion even, of course, but those moments were brief. Almost imaginary when looking back. It was a lot easier to believe Visha had not vomited in her first year as a conscript while in the trenches of the Rhineland. The sight of blood or the stench of death did not torment her. In fact, gunpowder and smoke clung to her essence like a perfume. War followed her everywhere she went.

The Major never liked half-answers, which made Father Schugel's presence a hidden blessing. He did not prod any further and went back to reading his scripture.

Visha glanced over and saw that his holy book was less of a bible and more of a notebook doodled with equations and sketches of weapons and devices seemingly copied from American pulp fiction novels. Just as bizarre as the designs she saw back at his secret basement.

Bipedal walking machines? Handheld mirrors? A throne?

She looked away, trying to focus her mind on seeing the Major's face, imagining that bright, infectious smile. Oh, the world will surely heal once the Major smiles again! The veteran mage could already envision a reunion under a clear blue sky, surrounded by the whitest doves, and the most noble of church bells. There, in her vision, beneath their symphony, at the altar before Father Schugel and his bible was Tanya in her virginal white gown. Delicate and perfect in all the ways that mattered most.

She could imagine her peers of the 203rd present, her friends from the RNOD, her brothers, and Elena, green with envy and blushing in her own delusion while living in the corner's shadow. Better luck next time, Elena. It looks like Visha has won the wager. Oh, of course, her parents would be present. Who wouldn't want to meet Argent Silver in person? And yet, try as she might, Visha's mind could not conjure up their faces.

As if their expressions were scratched out of a photograph, leaving nothing but white lines in their place.

I'm hideous. The White Russy scorned her mind. *I'm a coward. I ran from the comfort of my father and into the arms of a mad preacher.*

Her fingernails scraped against the skin of her palm like a flagellant, spurred by relentless bitterness and disgust; only blood could repay such debts to dishonored patriarchs.

I'm sick. My father was right, I don't feel right. These feelings do not feel right but they feel correct. What is wrong with me?! Oh God, please, save me from these horrible thoughts. Make me normal. Make me whole.

"There is nothing with you." The old man remarked, closing his book as the train slowed down to a stop at the station, before moving to retrieve their luggage. "You were lost but you have been found."

"How can you be so sure?" Visha replied, slowly rising from her seat to grab hers.

"I'm God's chosen shepherd." Schugel smiled wryly, "It's my job to retrieve lost souls such as yours to return to his light. And I don't intend to be mediocre. Not after everything I have done for the Imperial Army and Argent Silver."

"But-"

Father Schugel turned around and grabbed Visha by the shoulders. Neither his mouth nor his eyes flinched; his expression was wholly focused on discerning her face. This was the engineer that Tanya must have seen, approaching Visha's crisis like a mathematical equation to be taken apart and solved on a chalkboard. There was no coldness in his gaze, not like her father's, yet it did not provide the warmth she expected from a priest. But nonetheless, it was oddly comforting to be stared at so…nonjudgmentally.

Only Elena and Tanya gave her similar looks in the past.

"Visha, listen." He spoke with a voice that a teacher used to mentor his pupil, "I accept you as you are and who you will be. Your parents may not understand but I do. In this church, you will not be alone in your struggles. Yes, the burden is great, but you will not shoulder it alone."

"But…I'm queer. I'm a monster."

"So am I. And so is Argent Silver. You're not a monster. Don't let anyone tell you don't belong in Germania. You fought for the Empire. You bleed for the Empire. That is more than enough for me. I accepted queers like you in my church; Judeans and atheists too, you want to know why? Because you, like everyone else, are God's children searching for the same truth. So please, smile. Smile for yourself, for God, and Argent Silver. She would have wanted you to smile."

Tears trickled down Visha's cheeks as she lunged forward to embrace her benefactor.

"There, there." Schugel hugged her tightly, "Everything will be alright. Just open your heart to God's will and everything will improve for the better. We just have to crawl through the mud just a little longer."

"Thank you…" Visha wept silently.

"Don't thank me yet," he chuckled, "Come, someone is expecting us."

"Who?" she wondered aloud, wiping away her tears upon hearing the sound of encroaching footsteps. Her eyes shifted to spot a blond young man in the KSA uniform with hair brighter than a wheatfield and eyebrows as thick as caterpillars after too many leaves. Visha recognized him almost immediately.

"Vooren?!"

"Heil Degurechaff! Oh, hello Visha!" he saluted with a smile not too dissimilar to Tanya, "I hope I'm not interrupting something important but are you ready to depart? We have a mountain to explore."

"He's quite right," Schugel remarked, letting go of the woman before picking up his belongings again. "It's best if we arrive before dinner."

"Dinner?" She inquired, "Why?"

"More time for you to adjust to your new living requirements."

"Oh, right."

This is not summer camp after all.

It took some time before Visha was led to her transport. It was a luxurious Daimler-Benz, belonging to an Army officer, no doubt. Who else could own such a prized possession, in this economy, no less? She had half a mind to ask Father Schugel was the owner but immediately thought more on the subject. He was an engineer after all, cars seemed to be part of his repertoire but he did not like someone obsessed with aesthetics. He was a rare type of priest after all; too often did men in holy clothes wear gold watches before their congregation.

"Who's…" She began.

"It's mine." Vooren beamed, "It's beautiful, isn't it? My great-aunt purchased it after I returned home."

Although Visha smiled and gave her compliments, her heart curled in envy. If only she had money to woo the Major with the finest chocolates in a Daimler-Benz. If only her parents were rich.

Her parents were rich.

Doesn't she remember?

Until the Judeo-Bolsheviks stole all their family's w-

Stop.

Just Stop.

The Bolsheviks made her poor. Just the Bolsheviks. They are the scum of the earth. They are the ones who brought ruination to her homes, the old and the new. Just them. No one else.

They will hang. They will burn. Their children shall be cast to the stone floor before them. They will be made food for the crows to feast upon.

Visha took a deep breath, loaded her suitcase into the trunk, and stepped into the passenger seat. Father Schugel, to his credit, encouraged her to sit in the front and indulge in the latest technology Germania has to offer. Indeed, the seat was of the finest material that her eyes started drooping when she rested her head.

If the Revolution never occurred, would my father have purchased this car?

It was a ridiculous question. Why spend money on such a ridiculous metal box on wheels when there were perfectly good thoroughbred warhorses to ride? A Cossack can't be a Cossack if he has no horse. Such is the will of the Tzar. No doubt her brothers will get first pick but Visha was her father's only daughter. Perhaps if she had applied half of the charisma and forcefulness of Major, she could wrap her father around her finger and request any gift she wants.

But alas, that will never happen.

It's too late.

"Are you tired already, Visha?" Vooren grunted, driving to their hidden lair.

"No. Just thinking." She replied.

"About what?"

"About…where were you after Triano? I did not see you in Daneland."

"That? I was busy! I had a mother to take care of and a sister to help." He laughed awkwardly. "I suppose my training under the Major had allowed me to break out of the shadow of the women in my family."

"Strong-willed?" Father Schugel commented.

"Yup. I must admit, the most powerful thing a child can do is say 'no' to his elders. I suppose that this is what it takes to be a man."

"It must have taken a lot of courage," Visha told him.

"Life has been better, I'd say. I'm still afraid of them sometimes. But, you know, we have to make our own mark in life. Even my sister all but begged to accompany me to join the KSA."

"You have a sister? I don't remember if you mentioned her before."

"For good reason, I had enough burdens to carry while in the 203rd. I would rather not make Ursula a target of skirtchasers. We all know what happened to women in the Imperial Army when they didn't have brothers to protect them after all."

"Of course, how is she doing?"

"Last I heard of her, she was in Wien, tasked to accompany the Major. But that felt like ages ago."

"Do tell." The priest said.

"Well, the recent reports said that the train the Major was riding in was attacked by Croat terrorists." Vooren grumbled. "Thankfully, I have full confidence that the Major did everything in her power to make them regret targeting her."

"Thank God for protecting her," Schugel whispered solemnly.

"Those were my first thoughts too this morning when I saw the headlines. I couldn't believe it. Two dozen passengers were murdered by machineguns."

"That's…horrible." Visha pursed her lips. "Did your sister-"

"I don't know. That's the problem. The Major is there, so she should be alright. But we have yet to receive any news at all and every minute I fear that the worst has fallen upon her."

"Fret not." Schugel stated, "You have been serving her since, yes? Last I checked, the 203rd was still in full strength by the end of the war, don't doubt her now, for such is the divine providence of the Lord and his eminent servant."

"Of course…" Vooren clenched the steering wheel with iron-clad strength. "I just worry about my sister's safety. That's all."

"Have faith in the Major." Visha told him, "She will protect Ursula."

But who will protect Argent Silver?

Wanting to drift away from this line of thinking, the White Russy turned to the former Imperial Chief Engineer for an escape. Perhaps he can lighten the mood with another one of his lectures. Maybe she can inquire more about cars from him.

"I fear I must disappoint you, Visha," he replied. "Cars have never fascinated me, as amazing as they are, but I was more invested in different endeavors."

"Why not?" She questioned, feeling intrigued as to what could possibly be more interesting than these vehicles.

"These automobiles…truly amazing pieces of engineering, yes. But, again, they never inspired the same level of youthful curiosity in me. That honor goes to the trains."

"Trains?" Vooren looked up at the rear view mirror for a second to peek at Schugel, "When was that?"

"That back right before the Empire even formed. Ha! Those were the golden Bismarckian years. I was a young lad at the cusp of becoming a man."

"What were you doing?" Visha pressed further with quiet interest.

"I was a drummer boy, serving in my father's regiment, and that was where I saw my first train. Now that was true freedom, a real sense of adventure, as I traveled with my father to fight the Francois. Seeing how fast the countryside moved away from me…I'll never forget that experience. I knew since then I wanted to understand the power of technology."

"Wait," Vooren mumbled. "You served in the Franco-Preussian War? As a child?!"

"Precisely," he smiled warmly. "I was born in 1860 and I was ten years old when I marched with my father to liberate Alsace-Lorraine. A proud veteran of the 1st Westphalian Infantry Regiment. I celebrated my 11th birthday at Versailles when Parisee surrendered."

"A Westphalian…" the blonde driver murmured, giving Visha a sly wink. "No wonder you're still single."

"Hey now, Vooren." Schugel protested humorously, "When I was your age, I had a mistress in Prag, Warschau, and Budapestera. Back in my day, you weren't considered a real man until you were held by a Magyar and a Pullskan maiden in both arms. Though some youth didn't stop there, there were boys who sought a woman from the unifying kingdoms. 'The Ten Rings,' they called it. Dear Lord, I was such a rambunctious, spoiled child. And those women, I must say, were insatiable. How fortunate those days are behind me."

"Imagine that…" Vooren huffed, glancing over at Visha. "Wouldn't that be a hilarious sight if the Major attempted something similar…"

Her cheeks turned scarlet red upon the sinful, indulgent imagery that appeared in her mind. Good Lord, Visha cannot fathom the Major being tired or exhausted from having to satisfy ten brides. How scandalous! How perverse! How…rapturous. It's sinful yet so alluring.

What would her parents say? What would the Grand Patriarch say? What would the historians say?

Ten gold rings. Each one a trophy. A mark of conquest. A display of strength. To be immortalized like a Hellenic god surrounded by wine, beautiful women, and the clouds of paradise.

A goal impossible to most men but if there was one thing Visha knew of Argent Silver above all else, it is that Tanya will not be denied. What she wants, she will take.

But for once, can God allow Visha to be selfish? Can the White Russy be the only woman the Major would look to with such amorous desire?

"You got off easy, Schugel," Vooren remarked as he turned off the car before opening the driver's door. "Out of all the condemnations in her book, you got less than a page."

The doctor smiled awkwardly as he stepped out of the car.

"Nonsense, Argent Silver became who she is because she had what it takes. The other test pilots did not last more than three tests. She lasted long enough for me to finish my magnum opus. She may hate my methods, but I was with the guidance by the Lord; it was a test like a caterpillar emerging from its own cocoon to become a butterfly."

Visha had half the mind to strangle the elderly man for being so careless with the Major. The entire time during the Great War, Argent Silver was more likely to be killed in an equipment testing accident by that deluded idiot than a lucky shot from a rifleman. But how can she judge him when she herself was the target of every censure under the sun?

"Well, Visha…" The priest placed his hand on her shoulder. "Welcome to the Dragon's Lair."

"It's a tunnel." She replied blankly.

The massive, gaping tunnel, in fact, is complete with a nearby parking lot, a stone arch, a plaque sign, and a roadway heading inside. For a base meant for a cabal of scientists using religion to fund and disguise their illegal weapons research, this was very conspicuous. But in her heart, she felt that the Major would appreciate the audacity. Stealth is good but there is a thrill in the danger of being caught.

It's so overt, it's covert.

Author's note: The Ten Rings representing the ten unifying kingdoms: the Kingdom of Preussia, Saxony, Bayern, Wurttemberg, Danelans, Lothiern, Pullska, Bohemia, Magyarorszag, and Osterry.

Chapter Forty-Two: Dr. Gunther

"How…appropriately underwhelming." Serebryakov muttered under her breath. After her eyes got used to sunlight at the end of the tunnel that blinded her as if she was at the gates of Heaven itself, the Russy expected a castle or a venerable dark fortress of gothic stone design built into the very mountain itself. Instead, the tunnel opened up to what can only be described as a quaint little mountain village.

Perhaps it was by design; a humble beerhall, several rows of villas, and a few warehouses and a plain looking church to conceal the whatever machinations within with a veneer of innocuity.

But the view, however, gave berth to the whole of rural Bavaria. The farms and churches that dotted the land beyond reminded Serebryakov too much of Kieva. She raised her head up to see the mountain ridge, flat enough to walk and sit over the edge. Already, she imagined herself on a mountain hike with Argent Silver.

Walking together, holding hands, standing on the ledge and staring off the sinking sun until one of them pushes the other off the cliff.

"What were you expecting?" Father Schugel grunted, nudging the girl to move again. "A hidden bastion?"

"Perhaps."

"I'm too poor for that. Besides, my ideal choice for a hidden lab would have been in Osterry." he continued.

"Osterry?" Serebryakov turned her head

"Slovakia is not a poor location either to host a hidden lair for my cabal. But no one was willing to travel that far east despite the distance being shorter."

"As for Osterry?"

"Someone else was already using it." The priest grumbled a storm. "That fiend didn't have the decency to include me. I was his superior during the Great War after all!"

"I don't mind the view." Vooren Grantz remarked with a smile. "I can't get enough of it. I know my sister would have liked this place, she'll be mad I haven't brought her here sooner."

He quickly looked at the road ahead. It was dark and practically glossy.

"Oh good, they've finally paved the road here. I can finally park my car at my villa."

With that, the young veteran mage turned around and walked back into the tunnel. All the while, the pair continued ahead.

Almost immediately, Serebyakov's keen eyes spotted the passing of newborn children and their mothers going about their errands. Such a sight put a pause in her mind. Is this another veil to hide the true affairs of the Dragon's Lair?

Where is the technology? The beakers and the labcoats? The further they walked into the mountain village, the more Serebryakov was convinced she had been duped into coming here.

Then again, she wouldn't mind living in a place so…tranquil. So…far away from politics and Berun.

Just when the White Russy was about to question her benefactor, the old priest was already embracing another man that stepped out of a kiosk.

"Schugel! You came back!" The young stranger grinned, hugging the elder like a son embracing his father. He had a round face with his light brown hair neatly combed back. Resting upon his nose was a pair of circular glasses that indicated foresight and eccentricity. "And here I thought you found employment by the state."

"Katrel! I told you before I left, I'm a pastor now. I've traveled from the north to find my flock."

"Oh?" Katrel tilted his head. "And did you succeed?"

Schugel nodded, turning aside to reveal Serebryakov.

Almost immediately, Katrel's infectious smile disappeared seeing Visha's hostile face. His head, once extended for a greeting, retracted in hesitation. His expression has transformed into fearful discomfort and quiet disbelief. His eyes gave Father Schugel a cold glare, almost demanding an explanation.

"Katrel," the old priest said calmly. "This is First Lt. Viktoriya Ivanova Serebryakov. 'Visha' for short."

He then turned to the veteran mage. "Visha, this is my dear friend and a leading pioneer in New Mathematics, Katrel Gorm. He is a -"

"Judean." the White Russy stated plainly.

"Bohemian." Schugel forced the word out.

"From Moravia." Gorm corrected through the muttering of his breath. "How do you know I am a Judean?"

"You have the face of a Judean." she replied coldly.

"Visha." Father Schugel hummed, "Wait here please."

Serebryakov obeyed as she regarded the two men walking ahead to put some distance from her before whispering.

"Argent Silver is still the candidate that will wield the toy of yours that you have been tinkering on." Gorm leaned in to speak quietly into the priest's ear.

"As planned." Schugel nodded silently.

"That girl is a White Emigre, a Cossack. She is a Judenjager by blood and trade."

"I know."

"And do not let her be anywhere near my wife for the remainder of her stay."

"Understood."

With that mutual understanding, Katrel Gorm shook hands with Schugel before departing in great haste. Father Schugel was anything but pleased with Serebryakov's conduct. As soon as he walked up to the White Russy, he made her a back mule by shoving the remaining luggage into her hands.

"Of all the words in the Germanian language, you chose those to address a former student of mine." He fumed as he led her along the street. "I offer you a chance to be a witness and member to my cabal and you went up and…belittle my dear friend from Wien Circle. Unbelievable! Absolutely unbelievable!"

Serebryakov said nothing. Whether out of shame or Cossack stubbornness, even she could not tell.

"Do you not even hear yourself when you speak?" he continued with a sigh. "Did you not realize you were starting to sound like your father?"

Her ears turned crimson red.

"Who else is a Judean?" she questioned rather meekly.

"Is that really your concern right now?!"

"If I'm going to be surrounded by Judeans, then yes!"

"Save me from the stupidity of Slavs!" Schugel gasped in frustration. "Some of the most brilliant minds walking these streets are Judeans. Does that satisfy you?"

"You led me into a den of Judeans…" She suddenly spat, "And for what? To mock me? To be surrounded by my enemies?! I wager that the temple over there is a synagogue."

"You have no enemies here, Visha, save for those that you create. And that church is of shared faith; Judean worship takes place after my morning sermon."

Before Serebryakov could reply, a honk erupted from behind her. It was Vooren Grantz and his Daimler-Benz.

"Need a ride to your new home? You look awfully burdened." He called out.

Not waiting for Father Schugel's permission, the White Russy dumped the suitcases into the rear trunk before moving to occupy the passenger seat.

"Don't think our conversation is over." The priest said, "You'll need to apologize to Gorm."

"Gorm?" Grantz remarked, "What happened?"

"None of your concern." Schugel replied. "Just bad first impressions."

He lightly patted the hood of the car to signal that Serebryakov was free to go. His gaze watched the rear of the vehicle before turning away to find his peers.

"What did you do this time?" Grantz spoke after a minute of maddening silence.

"What I always do." Serebryakov grimaced. "What I always do."

"So about Gorm…"

"He is a Judean."

"Yeah, *eierkopfs* tend to be Judeans." he clicked his tongue. "Don't be so surprised. In Prag, they say every banker, professor, and bureaucrat is a Judean. Here though, it's more mixed I'd say. But…"

"But?" Serebryakov tilted her head in his direction.

"I have heard plenty of jeremiad from my grandmother, saying that they were overrepresented in the Empire. Perhaps I should not be surprised if those bankers, professors, and bureaucrats

saw the collapse as an opportunity to, well, wear the clothes of Germania and change it to their own image."

Visha saw Grantz wore a face of deep contemplation. "Their influence does not seem as benign as Schugel showed you to be. But I don't know, truthfully. This is a strange place to be."

A shiver flew up her spine. Was it instinct? Paranoia? Or the claws of Argent Silver tearing into her back?

"Did Schugel tell the people here that I was coming?"

"He did." Grantz answered truthfully as his car slowed to a stop at a villa. He pointed to the copper plaque that displayed Serebryakov's name. "As you can imagine, the Judeans didn't like it and they were a dominant voice. He was being outvoted."

"So he forced the issue through to have me?" Visha inquired as she got out of the car to follow him.

"He didn't." A new gentlemanly voice interrupted. Only then did she notice a well-groomed man in highly distinguished clothes standing at the front entrance. Balding like any other intellectual, he carried an air of dignity and high culture. His dark green eyes indicated deep knowledge and curiosity, the type of which belonged in a frozen wasteland rather than a blooming garden. "I did."

His smile was perhaps more unsettling than his eyes.

"Good day." Serebryakov spoke slowly. She immediately glanced at Grantz for an introduction.

"Visha, may I introduce you to Dr. Gunther." The young man lifted his right arm at a slanted angle. "Heil Degurechaff."

"Heil Degurechaff." The scholar replied with his own gesture.

"Heil Degurechaff." Serebryakov repeated with her arm outstretched but with shallow enthusiasm.

"'Dr. Gunther' is a humble way of introducing me, Grantz." he smirked arrogantly. "I am Doctor Hansel Falkenland Koppen Gunther, you know me as the leading pioneer of Eugenicism in the Empire, Germania now, but still, the title still applies."

"I'm sorry." Serebryakov slightly shook her head. "I have not heard of you."

Gunther's brow furrowed in skepticism. "I'm also a professor at the University of Berun. I taught race science, human biology, and rural ethnography. Surely you have heard of my courses?"

"I apologize. My university education was at the War Academy."

He huffed in annoyance.

"My peers call me '*Rassenpapst*'."

Race Pope.

"Ah." Serebryakov nodded slowly but awkwardly. She remembers now. "My brothers…and countrymen have spoken of your writings in the past."

"Good words I assume?"

"Your works have spawned mixed reception." She replied before closing her mouth harshly. It was a generous description. Dr. Gunther's interpretation of the Bolshevik Revolution was anything but flattering to the White Russy exiles. Truly, his research was some of the most dehumanizing she has ever encountered.

"Such is the nature of small minds," he grumbled before looking at Vooren after he handed Serebryakov her belongings. "Care to join us for coffee?"

"I must pass on the offer." Grantz shook his head as he climbed back into his car. "I have other affairs to deal with. Important ones." He turned to Visha with a guilty face, "Take care Visha."

"You petitioned for me." The White Russy stated, feeling abandoned by her friend's sudden departure. If only Elena or the Major was present to reinforce her. "Why? How?"

"Because you are a very special woman from a very…underperforming people. I want to know why you are the exception among your kind." The eugenicist explained as he moved between her and the fleeting car, imploring her to sit with him at the outdoor table. The scent of freshly brewed coffee was intoxicating. "As for why, let's just say that there are very powerful people in Berun that are curious about Dr. Schugel." He turned to her and with a widening smile, "And why he favors you so."

Blackmail. Serebryakov thought as she laid down her luggage before joining the professor. Her hand crept to Degurechaff's memoir hidden in her inner coat pocket.

"I told your detractors that if you were not included, the Federal Government, especially the conservative nationalists, would suddenly discover a massive embezzlement scheme conspired by some of the most intelligent and innovative Judeans in Europe in order to fund an illegal weapons program that may or may not be used to bring harm to Argent Silver. Imagine the scandal! Naturally, they acquiesced in favor of you."

"Funny," Serebryakov couldn't help but smile at the cruelty, "How when Judeans are mentioned, it changes the perception of the circumstances."

"Exactly!" he winked. "And where would they run to if they decided to flee like vermin? What government in their right mind would allow a cabal of rogue Judean scientists to develop a secret weapons program without their consent, knowledge, or control? Only the extremely naive or incompetent."
His tone soon shifted something darker.

"Alternatively, if all else fails, there is no shortage of passionate people, like the Nazis, who will catch or kill them alongside their families."

"And if that fails?" Visha challenged.

"You will keep them in line." He grinned. "And I know you have someone who would be very upset for a project such as this to go unfinished or sabotaged by a lack of faith."

"My friend?" she said. Was it Elena that Dr. Gunther was referring to?

"Is she your friend or your lover?"

Serebryakov blushed, the heat of shame erupting all over her face.

I'm sorry, Tanya. I could not control myself.

It was just a few shared kisses and intimate hugs.

It was nothing more. I was just so lonely and Elena was there.

"You weren't supposed to know that." She replied quietly.

"And you're supposed to be discreet." Dr. Gunther remarked, before pulling up his own copy Leviathan of Berun. And poured two cups with a coffee from a teacup as he said; "But Argent Silver is to be blamed for being so brazen. But that is to be expected from her. She is rather fond of you. Extremely fond. How curious that you, rather than Weiss or Lergen, is her primary focus. Not even Frederick the Great gave such high praise to Slavs."

"Ah." Serebryakov smiled awkwardly, her shoulder sagged. Not Elena. "I am not used to such compliments, especially from esteemed gentlemen such as you."

"We can blame it on the folly of Science. Pride can easily cloud the judgement of my peers." He conceded, before drinking from his coffee mug. He then glanced down at his book. "Argent Silver has such a queer way with words. Every other page when she presents a new idea or

philosophy, I wonder where she got her knowledge from. It's so articulate and advanced for someone of her sex and age."

The White Russy lightly scoffed, shielding her disappointment. Of course, this conversation goes back to the Major. It's always about her. It's never about Visha.

"Was there anything that she wrote that intrigued you the most?" She gritted her teeth.

"Plenty of things. Notably you. But also her…how do I put this politely…her attitudes towards non-Germanians."

"Who? The Pullskans?"

"No, Serebryakov. I'm not referring to the east or south, but the interior. The other non-Germanians."

The Judenvolk.

"Does it offend you?" The White Russy remarked before hiding behind a sip of coffee.

"If these words," he tapped the book for emphasis, "Came from a good-for-nothing vagrant, I would be very offended. But since these are Argent Silver's words, I was taken aback by her piety. She has the patience and grace worthy of a saint. I almost refuse to believe she wrote these words. In fact, I certainly do believe that the Argent Silver was obfuscating what really occurred in Konigsberg."

"I do not know what went down in Konigsberg. I was not there."

"Indeed, there was no other reliable witness to the incident except for Herr Foerster. What a coincidence that he disappeared shortly after the November Boycott."

"Herr Foerster?" Serebryakov suddenly remembered the man that Elena brought to Zettour's meeting. Now that he mentioned his name, she had not kept track of his whereabouts, given the changing circumstances. Perhaps Elena would know? "What about him?"

Most likely not. That man is beneath her notice; just a random stranger in a bad location at a worst time. He gave his testimony and that was it. Does it really matter what became his fate afterwards?

"Something about his lack of presence bothers me. Tell me, Serebryakov, do you have any strong opinions on Judeans?"

At that moment, she wished she had not angered Father Schugel.

If only the Major was here to distract him.

"'Strong' is a broad term, Dr. Gunther," Serebryakov began, "Are you referring to mood?"

"Perhaps…actually, yes! Mood. Feelings. How do you feel about them?"

"I…" The veteran mage sputtered. God, why is it so hard to say a few words? What does she think about him? Does she still despise them? Should she hate them? The Major told her that they were not the enemy. Are they friends? They don't like her or her kin. Visha used to be so sure in her ideological foundation but Argent Silver shattered it.

But what about the Bolsheviks? What about the Russy Revolution? What about the Judeans that do plot and scheme against the Tzar?

"I…don't have any feelings."

"Except confusion," he observed. "Perhaps I can help you reach a clearer understanding."

"I would rather not." Serebryakov suddenly got up from her seat to retreat indoors but her arm was suddenly grabbed by Dr. Gunther.

"I insist." He warned sternly. "The Judean Dilemma is the most important issue of our era. We all need to have an answer for it."

"I already gave my answer to her." Her bones shuddered at the memory of being beaten by Degurechaff. The Major's reaccount of that night was too painful, too embarrassing, to be put into print. There was no hiding from the shame.

"And do you still stand by your answer? If not, sit and let us discuss matters concerning the future of our races."

"I would rather not." She ripped her arm free from the professor's grip and just when she made her move to open the door, he continued.

"Don't you wish to exceed her expectations?" The doctor implored her. "Do you not wish for her to understand our perspective? She is young, naive still, hidden underneath a layer of exceptional quality and character."

She does, in fact. More than anything really.

Sure, the Major admired her. Adored her even. Dedicated her entire manifesto to her. And yet, there was something missing. Something left unsatisfied from the text. But what can she really complain about? After being exalted…

The Major wasn't there. She doesn't know.

Degurechaff denounced the late Tzar as an idiot; an inept fool that led the Russy Empire into ruin. She cannot help but feel her resolute dismissiveness revolting, like how Dr. Gunter dissected her people. It was so simple. So easy an explanation.

It was so sterile and merciless.

How can she know? She wasn't there.

Her parents knew what occurred. Her countrymen knew. Her enemies knew. Visha knew; She was there when the Red Banner was raised in Kiyev. The life she knew, the nation she loved, lost to the Reds as it all vanished in flames.

She does not know. She couldn't have known. SHE DOES NOT KNOW. SHE COULDN'T HAVE KNOWN. SHE DOES NOT KNOW! SHE COULDN'T HAVE-

Ash. Serebryakov remembered the ashes of the Bolshevik Revolution. The ash that filled her lungs and burned her eyes. The ash that broke away from the burning wood that stung her skin and torched her hair.

Visha knows. Visha knows everything she needs to know of her enemies. Of the criminals that brought ruin to everything.

"Argent Silver thinks she knows more but we have seen more." Dr. Gunther's voice pierced through her thoughts. She found herself back at her chair. "We know the truth of this world. We know who our enemies are and hers. We know what we despise. What we reject. Who is she to tell us that our eyes and ears deceive us of the naked truth? We warned her. And she did not listen and now look at what has happened! She has been exiled by the very party she sought to uplift."

Serebryakov looked back at the eugenicist; their eyes in perfect alignment.

"She thinks you're an idiot." He continues. "That you do not know your own history and culture. Unaware that she herself is being deceived. Deceived by who, you wonder? By the very people she claims to protect! Who are these people? The Globalist Cosmopolitans. They control the banks. They control the schools. They control the bureaucracy. And right now, they are in control of Germania. Eventually, they will control Argent Silver like a puppet, a doll to their every whim, unless we do something about it."

"Degurechaff warned about men like you…" The White Russy whispered, "She's always right."

"Then tell me, what happened to Herr Foerster? Did she tell you?"

"No…"

"No indeed, why? Because she does not respect you."

"Neither did you." Serebryakov spoke harshly, "I remember your research papers about my people. How my culture was savage and inferior."

"Fair enough," He conceded gracefully, "I may have been too hasty in my generalization in formatting the natural hierarchy of races but the Great War has revealed to me many truths that my younger self was too eager to regard."

"Such as?" She challenged.

"The Slavic race is not above redemption. After researching the role of the White Russy movement and especially after reading Argent Silver's glowing reports of you, I had to adjust my theories…"

"Yes?"

"The Slavic race is just as much a victim of Judeo-Asian influences as is the Germanic race. Both our cultures. Both our races. Both our nations are being torn apart by these parasites seeking to destroy our God-fearing societies. Just as these Globalist Cosmopolitans brought low the Russy Empire, they have done with the Germanian Empire. Degurechaff. Serebryakov. The two keys need to save Europe from this infernal downfall."

"I feel…I feel like she would not be pleased with me if she knew of this conversation."

The White Russy wanted to accept his words. All of it. She knows she must. After each and every humiliation she endured from her allies and overlords, to be validated as a chosen savior was too delicious to pass up. Zettour, Rudensdorf, everyone who doubted her will rue the day Serebryakov rose up to take her place in the Sun. Unlike Degurechaff, Visha will be the savior of two European empires. The Major was a great teacher but perhaps it is high time for the apprentice to surpass the master.

Indeed, why should Visha be content living under someone else's shadow?
Let her make her own decisions.

Let her create her own downfall.

Let her live in her own hell.

"Last time I checked, you do not need her permission to be the savior of the Slavo-Aryan Race." Dr. Gunther grunted. "Don't you understand? Degurechaff is chosen to save the West. You were

meant to save the East. To stop what ruined the ancient empire. A Third Rome, Serebryakov! *A Third Reich*!"

In the beginning, the West has fallen while the East endured.

Now at our end, the East has fallen and the West is faltering.

History is a wheel.

One Revolution. Stop.

Another Revolution. Stop.

Another Revolution. Stop.

What changed? Nothing.

History is a conman's game.

I've been fooled. My family has been fooled. Everyone has been fooled.

It's the same people that remained in charge over and over again.

Can Tanya break the wheel? Or will she too be deceived like the rest of us?

What hope is there for lesser men and women to change the world if she cannot bring the end of History?

"Thank you for bringing me here, Dr. Gunther." Serebryakov got up from her seat to shake his hand. "And for having this conversation with me but I must retire now. You introduced me to many grand ideas that I will need to contemplate on. It would only be fair to let you know I seek to challenge them with the other residences of the Dragon's Lair."

"I'm your friend here, Serebryakov." The scholar said, taking her hand in a gentle squeeze. "Together with Doctor - pardon me - Father Schugel. We both are interested in your wellbeing and future success. These Judeans, they do not care for you. They are not pleased with you. They will not respect you. There are no mistakes from them. Only deliberate acts of sabotage to delay and denounce you. Mark my words. They will say to you that you were not meant to prosper here."

"Allow me to be the judge of that myself." She replied before retreating inside her new temporary home.

The door was shut behind her and the White Russy did not look back, her eyes were getting heavy, every step felt like the first time she went on that mountain for training, with a boulder tied on her stomach. She knelt and prayed before a nutcracker standing diligently above the fireplace. Her body convulsing, her mouth was hesitant to move. In the end, she was able to pull herself together like pulling sand from a wave.

Come tomorrow, she will meet with Schugel and apologize to his friend. It's the least she can do for the priest. If he says that she has no enemies here, then Visha should at least trust him.

"O Heavenly King, Comforter, Spirit of Truth, who art everywhere present and fillest all things, Treasury of good things and Giver of life: please, please protect and guide Tanya. Grant her wisdom, grant her knowledge, and grant her protection. Please return her to me. I give you everything I have. I offer everything I own. I lay before you all my sins. Please, please keep her safe and unharmed, O Good One."

You are the reason, and the only reason, that Tanya is still alive.

Chapter Forty-Three: A Bear Among Rabbits

True to her word, if a Cossack's honor meant anything these days, Viktoriya Serebryakov met with Katrel Gorm at a secluded gazebo, with Father Schugel as her witness. She repented more than was expected, more than Gorm had wanted, yet she felt as miniscule as a grain of dirt being pulled by the river. But her words proved poignant as he accepted her apology in the end with awkward mercy. A shallow laugh from his mouth gave her pause, as if his mind immediately contemplated mockery.

"You do not have to apologize for the Tzar's actions for I was born in Moravia, remember?" He tried to reconcile with a faint smile, "But I accept nonetheless. Just…be more mindful. I don't want to be your enemy. I just want us to live normal lives."

Serebryakov immediately snarled like a cage beast despite the tranquil open air and countryside.

"Normal? What does it even mean to live normal lives? We're all abominations in God's eyes!"

The men watched her disquiet, their eyes glazed with silent pity as they stood, unmoving. It was when she was far enough, beyond earshot that Father Schugel opened his mouth.

"I should have said something."

"Forget something, she needs someone." Gorm remarked ruefully. "Don't tell me she has already been seduced by Dr. Gunther."

"I tried filling that void in her heart for some time now." Schugel shook his head solemnly. "The New Physics is easier to understand than people however."

"Regardless, anyone is better than Dr. Gunther, that daft volkist. Do you really not have anyone else that can help with her psychological needs?"

The priest thought for a moment before turning his head in the direction of unseen Berun.

"Doing so would violate the secrecy we have here."

"That ship had already sailed the moment Gunther found out. I would not be surprised if he is sending daily reports to the government in spite of his vow of silence. Besides, we have a greater issue at hand."

"True enough…" Schugel muttered, "Very well, Gorm. Right as always. I can call a friend from my university days. I think he may be the right man for Visha."

"You have many companions, Adelheid. Who do you not have as a friend?"

"Dr. Gunther."

Both men shared a laugh.

"In all seriousness though," Gorm paused, "Are you still committed to using her?"

"As I said it before, there is no other alternative. Other than liquidating Gunther to spare us half the trouble."

"If the rumors from Yugoslavia are true, keeping her here is the other half."

Much to Gorm's fears, Dr. Gunther may have had his talons dug deep in Serebryakov's mind. It was not his intention to ostracize her from the Dragon's Lair, but in such a small town, news flew faster than the wind. The cossack was an unwelcome guest. Whether in the labs, church, holidays, or anywhere really. Perhaps he should have spoken up. Perhaps he should have welcomed her.

But he remembered who she was, it is already enough to spur him to tremble from what she might do, what she can do. He already has enough to worry for, not to mention the omnipresent dangers toward his wife that loomed over his conscience.

She was more beast than woman; Argent Silver herself praised the efficient killing machine that she was. He was not ignorant of the stories told by fleeing Russy Judeans of Cossack brutality in Kieva; to invite her into his home was to invite the inevitability of death.

And yet, it was pitiful to watch her grow accustomed to her new surroundings.

Maybe, just maybe, Gorm should have said something.

Anything really.

Just to get her away from Gunther.

Every time the cashier refused to look her in the eye, the bartender spit into her drink, or when even the children of scientists and engineers avoided her like the plague, there was Dr. Gunther at her front porch, sharing coffee and racial theories. This is not an environment to raise and educate a living weapon in.

The only other person that would talk to Serebryakov was Schugel but he was the director, mayor, and constable of the secret village. He could not spare every second just for her. Not when his project was so nearly perfect completion.

It's one thing to fear a bomb; it's another thing entirely when that bomb has two legs, can fly, and harbors an intense loathing of its creators.

He needs to say something. Anything really. But what should he say? What words can he share with her that has not already been muttered before to the point of null?

Then the rumors of rape from the south! Dear God, what happened in Yugoslavia?

Just when the Silver Revolution has reached the ears in Dragon's Lair, Argent Silver got herself arrested and subjected to violence by her captors? Too many grim tidings occurring at once! The very idea that such a potent warrior could be confined so easily was especially unsettling. Despite the qualms of an early departure, he would not be offended for the project to become halted if the Cossack left early to travel south.

But instead, she merely isolated herself in her cabin. Refusing to come out and no one, not even Schugel knew if she was even eating or drinking. For all they could tell, that house became her tomb.

Speaking of…

The passing of a newspaper landed upon his coffee table. The theorist looked upon to see that familiar face of his former professor, though his face was grim.

Gorm immediately glanced down and was immediately taken aback by the headlines. A massacre in Beograd? How many died?

"The Serbs said only a hundred died," Schugel pursed his lips, "But witnesses said thousands. Perhaps there is major bias on both sides but the outcome is the same."

"All this because of one child soldier." Gorm shook his head in disbelief. "This shouldn't be possible…is there any good news at least."

"There is one relating to us." Schugel turned around to introduce a new friend. Another wrinkly elder, though a junior by almost ten years to priest, and another younger but still aging man. "May I have the pleasure to introduce you to Dr. Rotfeld and his partner, Karlous Giesenward."

"Ah, yes." Gorm stood up from his seat to shake hands with the two newcomers. "Have you already been informed by Schugel?"

Dr. Rotfeld nodded. "I have been very eager to meet with Serebryakov ever since Adelheid told me about her. We've both come to help."

She should have been there.

But she was sent away.

She should have been there.

But she was sent away.

She should have been there.

But she was sent away.

Why was she not there for her?

Why was she not there for her?

Why? Just Why?

She fasted for days. Perhaps even weeks now. The days flew through her mind like macine gun bullets running over her ear. Not that Visha could discern anymore after covering the windows with curtains.

Dark was the news of her champion's capture. The room, despite the evening light clawing past the curtains, seemed to her to grow even darker.

In her blind fury, the cossack picked up the nutcracker and hurled it against the wall. The antique shattered, its splinters burst from the cracks like shrapnel, she looked on with despair and multiplying fury. Staring with unflinching eyes, she watched as the ruined toy pulled itself back together like iron to magnets before tipping over to stand upright.

"Begone Satan!" Visha cried out, clutching at her head in the attempt to pull out her hair at the roots. "Take your poisonous words out of my mind and go back from where you came! I don't want to do this anymore! I don't want to be here! I don't want to stay!"

The nutcracker opened its mouth and the whole building was engulfed in alien lights, so bright that it attacked her eyes with such blinding purity that her fingers clawed at her face to tear them out. Its voice thundered with such force and ferocity that overshadowed a thousand artillery bombardments, her ears felt like rupturing from the pressure.

"I am the Alpha and the Omega. Your Beginning and Your End. I am your Holy Father and you will carry out your righteous task. Now Kneel."

Her body could not disobey. Visha collapsed before the wooden doll, her knees bending before her God, while her head brought low.

Tears flowed freely from her eyes only for her face to be marked by a hint of sunlight leaking through the crack from the window curtains. It was then that she realized the room went back to being dim, though somewhat brighter.

Do not worry, my child. She will be safe from harm. I will deliver her unto you. And You, shall be rewarded for your faith.

The voice echoing in her head was more gentle this time. It reminded Visha of silk blankets and a warm hearth. It flooded her mind of better times of the Russy Empire. Before the Revolution where her family was whole. Her mother much stronger. Her father much kinder. Her brothers more innocent. The golden days where there was peace and plenty. Oh, only Tanya was born much earlier to see it back then…

Visha's jagged rage against Heaven smoothed like a stone brushed by the waves after a millenia.

With great effort, she slowly left the floor and stumbled into the washroom. After much hesitation, the cossack forced herself to stare into the mirror. Like Tanya during the Great War, where her pupils were of pure golden light.

Visha blinked once.

Twice.

Seven times.

It took her twelve times of continuous blinking before the light faded, allowing her natural blue color to return.

Suddenly, there was a knock at the door and she jumped.

After making herself more presentable, Visha answered the call with the expectation that Dr. Gunther delivers another enthusiastic lecture on racialism over tea and cake. While it was flattering to meet such an esteemed intellectual with bountiful praise towards her culture, his rhetoric was uncanny. Sterile even. It was not like sharing jokes or food among friends but more of a doctor dissecting a corpse and cutting up the organs paired with snide remarks towards its owner. Visha was not totally ignorant of the trace of condescension that dripped from his words.

Only God knows how much Argent Silver was guilty of indulging in her own innate virtuousness.

I know nothing of my own people and state. Visha pondered bitterly. *While they know everything.*

Much to her surprise, it wasn't the Race Pope. But rather a portly, grey haired man with a round face and a magnificent mustache that resembled a walrus whiskers. Ellipse-shaped glasses rested gently on his massive nose, a snout that was more befitting on a pig. Unlike most scientists who wore ties with a more casual attire, his was loud, polka dot bow tie of pink and white together with his beige coat over his cyan shirt. Most graciously however, instead of the iron judgement or naked fear that inhabited the eyes of the cabal members here, there was nothing but of pure empathy for her.

She glanced at the second gentlemen slightly behind. He was relatively younger, most certainly handsome for any lady who fancies older men, with curly dark brown hair swept to the side. What was really bizarre was his clothing: A lady's dress of deep purple with gold trimmings complemented by black stockings and heeled shoes. Only then did Visha notice that he wore lipstick.

If this effeminate man were to walk in the streets of Kieva in the Russy Empire, he would have been shot on sight by a Black Hundreds for promoting "Judean Cosmopolitan Degeneracy." Knowing her father and the conservative side of her people, the Black Hundreds and the Cossacks would be drawing sabers and pistols against each other over the privilege of murdering this queer man in broad daylight.

"Hello, Frau Serebryakov." The first man nodded gently before suddenly raising his right arm. "My humble apologies… I'm supposed to say 'Heil Degurechaff.' Heh. Allow me to try again. Heil Degurechaff, Frau Serebryakov."

"Heil Degurechaff." The queer man repeated with a smile.

"Heil Degurechaff." Visha replied hesitantly, with her own arm raised.

"I am Doctor Maximillian Rotfield, a close friend of Doctor Schugel." the elderly man bowed. "And this esteemed acquaintance of mine is Doctor Karlous Giesenward. My partner-"

"And lover." Dr. Giesenward announced, causing both men to blush like schoolgirls.

Visha, however, looked as if she was struck in the face.

"You're…" she stared in utter disbelief at Rotfield.

"Homosexuals? Yes, yes we are." Rotfield nodded with surety. "I myself am a homosexual Judean."

She quickly glanced at Giesenward, prompting him to remark: "Not Judean myself but those Nazi thugs don't seem to care."

"Dear, let's not talk about those Brownshirts." Rotfield grinned. "We're here to talk with you, Serebryakov."

"Why?"

"Because we know very well how you feel about…this. Everything."

"Can we talk inside?" Giesenward requested honestly.

"What study do you represent?" The cossack brunette demanded, not yet ready to allow a gay couple in her living room.

"Sexology." Rotfield answered immediately. "I represent my life's work, the Institut für Sexualwissenschaft."

"My degree was in curation but I operate as Dr. Rotfield's archivist and secretary."

"My greatest and best number two!" Rotfield smiled. "Right next to Li."

"But may we enter?"

Visha was silent from envy. How dare these men look at each other with such warmth and courage in a world set out to despise them.

"Of course."

She retrieved coffee and snacks to share to distract herself while she try to process her newfound situation despite her mind being completely bewildered. 12 years ago, Visha could not have predicted she was hosting the queers in her home, even a temporary one. And it would be a bad joke to even mutter in the same vicinity as her parents. Yet here she was, sitting down with the most gayest men she has ever seen. Which births the only question, why?

"Why?" she said louder. "Just why? WHY ME?"

"It's because of the book." Rotfield answered softly. "We were surprised that she outed herself and you as vowed lifelong partners. We knew in an instant that we had to align our interests with the Argent Silver and the KSA. For what it's worth from strangers as us, we are sorry for you."

"You joined the KSA?" Visha blinked.

"It was inevitable. A majority of our patients are KSA members, sympathizers, or just admirers of Argent Silver. Plus, Muller did give us armed protection for our trip to the Dragon's Lair. Believe me, no one else was willing to defend us or my research."

"Then I'm just another patient?"

"Not first nor the last…and I was a former soldier in the Imperial Army."

"So was I." Gisenward spoke up. "A veteran of the Great War as well. I even saw Argent Silver myself when she was doing a combat mission. From one veteran to another, I am at least happy that you found a career after the war."

"This…this is all so sudden." she murmured.

"Not the first time I heard that phrase before." Rotfield chuckled lightly. "But what is love but the sudden rush of earnest passion? But, in all seriousness, Serebryakov, that was the most fascinating thing about the Great War. In the midst of death and carnage, the men and women who bled and died still found love in the face of calamity. Yes, there was great horror and despair but from what I discovered, there was love."

"Love? Real love?"

He nodded. "For the first time in modern European history, especially in modern Germanian history, queer people realized they were not alone. Conscription was a blessing in disguise as it allowed queer Imperial citizens from every corner to find each other. Like what happened to you, Serebryakov. If it weren't for the Great War and the draft, you and Degurechaff would never have known each other."

Visha turned silent as a grave, looking downwards to obscure her expression.

Rotfield continued.

"To put it bluntly, we were invited here because there is at least someone present that cares deeply about you. We came here to tell you that you are not alone in your struggles. We understand this pain. I've seen it occur all too often before. From what Schugel told me, I have concluded, and feel free to offer a rebuttal, that this outward display of violence and hatred is the euphoric unleashing of internalized self-bigotry. You hate others because you hate yourself more. Because you have been taught to hate the traits that define you the most."

Her silence continued.

"Please, I insist. Do forget what Argent Silver wants for a second. Forget what your parents want, what God wants, what the Tzar or even your people wanted. What do you want? What does Viktoriya Serebryakov want?"

Author's Note: Feel free to disagree with Dr. Rotfeld's question. He is not meant to be a perfect genius; he's same generation as Freud after all. Someone has to lay down the foundations.

Rest assured, the payoffs is coming ever closer if you do not see this as the first in a long series of payoffs. We are approaching the climax.

Chapter Forty-Four: Bear With Me

"What do I want?" Visha mumbled absentmindedly. The repetition is more for the recontextualization of the question. It was ridiculous hesitating now. Not a minute had passed since she had envisioned; a wedding and a farmstead, murals of a glorious war, chests full of medals and trophies, an ocean of dead Reds, luxury cars, furs, and all the renown and adoration in the world. No more humiliation, no more poverty nor disgrace, but of honors laid down on every footprint she left behind. "Everything. I suppose I want everything."

"Everything?" Rotfeld raised a curious eyebrow. "Everything yet…I see. Yes, we want all of our wantings to be real. I wanted the victory to be the Fatherland's, but what about your very own? What you said is a vague notion Serebryakov, Focus on one thing first. One thing you want more than anything else. The one thing that will give you everything else."

"Tanya von Degurechaff; The Argent Silver." The White Exile answered immediately. Judging by the heavy sigh emitted by Rotfeld, it sounded like the wrong answer.

How can it be the wrong answer?

"Which one?" The doctor questioned. "Is it Tanya or is it Argent Silver you want?"

"Are they not the same person?" Visha huffed.

"Yes…"

Her heart soared.

"And no."

Only for it to be shot down. She felt her patience being tested. Tanya earned this title, there are many Tanyas and few Degurechaffs but when the word Argent Silver is seen and heard. It is the only thing that lived as a legacy of her achievements. It reminded all that there is a woman who rose from the mundane, became the symbol of Imperial modernity, ferocity, and meritocracy. It was her who bled first and fought after the fall.

"Why?" she questioned.

"How much do you know Degurechaff personally? Not as the Major, not as Argent Silver, not as your lover, but as an individual. Do you truly know her?"

The White Russy grinded her teeth in discomfort. Part of her wanted to end the conversation, even the entire session, at that moment; she already felt the throb of her clenched fists. Such inquiry seldom left a recipient at ease for the remainder of the day. She closed her eyes and

retreated into her mind and pulled out every scrape of memory where her beloved wasn't in uniform, not sitting in an office, nor delivering speeches and proposals.

Tanya was, and still is very committed with her goals and had a mostly lackadaisical attitude towards her subordinates, does that count for something? Then again her first impression of Tanya was seeing her removing uncooperative subordinates and then, after helping her gather her new subordinates, followed by a month where even she is not spared from Tanya's draconic training methods. Cruel did not even begin to describe the Major when she was in the mood for discipline.

Through the course of the war, when hell seemed to have risen high enough that heaven seemed distant, even the weariness of the war reached Tanya.

Whenever Visha opened her eyes first and saw her lover's sleeping face, from the way the light seemed to glow under the light of the moon or the rays of the rising sun, the expression on the blonde's face was of pure tranquility. The sight filled the White Russy's spirit with so much joy and blissful adoration. The brunette never could have mustered the courage and initiative to seize the opportunity to tell Tanya that seeing her slumbering face without a hint of trauma sucked all the evil and anxiety out of Visha's heart.

If.

Just if…

Tanya had just looked at her with the same eyes and smile that she received from Visha, maybe…just maybe, the November Boycott would have been avoided all together.

And yet…

Was it Tanya that Visha loved?

Or was it Argent Silver?

Where did the war hero end and the little girl begin?

Visha's lip trembled in approaching despair.

Was everything a lie? An illusion? Was the love and loyalty she had even real? Was it all misplaced? Misused?

Her mind drifted back to the apartment, to the trophies and medals, before pondering upon the words in Tanya's book. Its dedication flew around her mind as free flowing as the Dniepier River. Was that Tanya speaking to Visha or Argent Silver?

Did Argent Silver love Visha or was it Tanya?

Did…Visha spent half her life adoring the wrong person?

All those years…wasted. Oh God, don't let it be true.

"It is fine if you do not have the answer right now." Dr. Rotfeld gave a sympathetic smile. "I have seen many men and women who hide their true selves from their partners."

"Am I not worthy of her trust?" The Cossack grieved with newfound stress stretching every word like torn bread. Everything that happened and what she helped to happen turned a different luster with the new light. No, this alien perspective denies one thing: "Have I not bled enough for her? Have I not killed enough for her? I have done EVERYTHING she has asked me to do."

"Again, was it for Tanya or was it for Argent Silver?"

"Does it matter?" her voice growled most unnaturally low.

Gisenward spoke up with the tenderness that Visha could not imagine inhabiting a masculine voice. Unlike most men in her life, there was no trace of anger, hatred, and lust.

"Visha, perhaps it is rude and unbecoming of me to be so forthright concerning your sorrows but we are asking these questions to help you understand. To protect you even. From a false hope. From a false love. We…both read and listened to her speeches and her book; Father Schugel gave all the details on your relationship as he is a close associate to both you and Tanya. We are not doubting your love, we are merely asking if the person you loved still exists."

The White Russy glanced from Gisenward to Rotfeld with ominous silence. The stillness prompted the old Judean to resume his talk.

"War…changes people. Politics…changes people. And sometimes not entirely for the better. Have you even considered the possibility that Tanya is no longer walking this earth? That perhaps, the first person Argent Silver killed in the Great War was Tanya von Degurechaff?"

Oh God, was Lergen right all along? That the Devil has been wearing Tanya's skin and face since 1924? It cannot be!

No, that is not what Rotfeld meant.

Her father changed after the Revolution. Her mother and her brothers too.

"So many questions…" Visha grumbled bitterly, her mind immediately contemplating her father. "Is it so much easier to not think? Is it not better for fools such as I to simply do and act and obey whatever force from above compels us to do? Is it not more ideal to live in a comfortable

lie than to experience the unforgiving truth? I love Tanya because she is Argent Silver. I love Argent Silver because she is Tanya. She left me because I wronged her, that I dishonored her, that I am an abomination against God and Creation, and that I must work and bleed so that she will look upon me once again and envelope me in her benevolent grace."

A few tears fell from her eyes. An indication of weakness. The sensation sickened her. Argent Silver does not tolerate weakness, so why should Visha?

All things being equal, isn't becoming more like Argent Silver the goal?

Strength above everything?

Visha is twenty five years old now, about to be twenty six, so why is she crying? She is an adult woman. Her father was right: she isn't a child anymore. She is a Cossack. Cossacks don't cry, they fight. They kill. They die. What more to life is there for a Cossack?

When bears look into the blue sky and see eagles flying among the clouds, do bears complain? Do bears cry out to God demanding why they are forced to live among the rocks and dirt while there are those who are free to touch the horizon? No! Bears hunt! Bears scavenge! Bears hold dominion over the forests and mountains. That is their place in the natural order.

This is how it's always been for centuries.

Whenever you are sad, her father's voice suddenly reached out in all its iron glory. D*on't be. Be Angry. Be Furious. Be angry that the world has been brought to ruin. You're a Cossack. When there is a problem, it's your job to shoot at it until it stops being a problem.*

Visha swallowed her sorrow so her scorn could emerge.

"I think I know what the real issue is." Rotfeld softly remarked, looking at his lover with compassionate, tiresome eyes before returning to Visha. "Whenever you open your mouth, someone else is speaking."

The Judean has five more seconds to make his case before the Cossack tears his skin off. Ignorant to her thoughts, he nodded before looking straight at her eyes, then distractedly to somewhere else.

"How much self-determination does our civilized society truly allow for its inhabitants? Sons repeat the words of their fathers; patriarchs dictate the laws of reality. Daughters are represented by their mothers; wives governed by their husbands. God does not speak in our modern world but the Pope does, and he is about to declare us queerfolk unnatural, wicked creatures in the eyes of Christ.

For Argent Silver; it seems, from her memoir, enjoys hearing herself talk. Perhaps, that is why she enjoys your company more than any other soldier or associate she encounters. You have a gift of absorbing every piece of knowledge she indulges with you and regurgitating it back at her whenever she seeks affirmation. This schism you currently experience is the result of your decision to speak someone else's rhetoric towards her on that crucial night."

"Are you saying that I am incapable of original thought?" she spat.

"No, I'm saying it is high time you start having original thoughts." Rotfeld shook his head. "Don't you want to become yourself? Do you not desire to become independent? I'm sorry but I have to contemplate that there is a possibility that your love for Tanya, for Argent Silver, is unachievable until you can break out of her shadow and force her to stand next to you as your equal. You were the servant that needed to become the master. That is the cause of your predicament."

Argent Silver could live without Visha. Why not Visha without Argent Silver?

Yet Elena's words remerged from the shadows. An omen of iron of what was to come.

We're in too deep. We're already dead…

Does Visha want to leave? Does she want a way out?

But where will she go? What will she do?

And what of Weiss, Neumann, and Konig? Her kin in the RNOD? The Tzar? Her family? Her Elena?

What about Elena? What would her closest friend think?

Oh, Elena…sweet Elena…why did you betray me?

Yet Rotfeld was wrong about one thing: God does, in fact, speak. God has chosen Visha for greatness. That was undeniable. Who is she if not a devout child of God?

"Dr. Rotfeld?" The brunette spoke up quietly, prompting the Judean to lean forward. "Am I a monster?"

He immediately shook his head. "No. Not to me."

"Do you forgive me?"

It was then Dr. Gisenward's turn to participate.

"We are not here to condemn you, Visha. We are scientists, not judges. You are a God-loving woman, yes? Then let God be the final arbitrator of justice. There are those who would never forgive you but such are the consequences of your previous actions. That is alright. The real question is 'do you forgive yourself?' And if so, how would you honor it?"

The Cossack nodded along before casting her eyes downward.

"You gave me much to think about. For that I am grateful. But can I be secluded with my thoughts and prayers for the remainder of the day?"

"Of course." Rotfeld emerged from his seat slowly before raising his right arm once more. "Heil Degurechaff! But again, always remember that you are not alone. We like you. Father Schugel also likes you and he wants you to meet his friends and his colleagues. We all want what's best for you."

"We enjoy having company with you, Visha." Gisenward performed the salute in perfect unison. "I hope for more opportunities in the future. Perhaps over lighter conversations with some tea."

With that, the two lovers left the cabin in peace.

Just when the White Russy was afforded a moment of peaceful contemplation, there was another knock on the door. Unlike the merry, gay couple before, it was Dr. Gunther, with all the warmth of a freshly carved slab of stone. He was smiling, yes, but his joy was not for her.

In a way, he really was most like Argent Silver: a prodigy that enjoys the sound of his own words.

"Heil Degurechaff." he greeted with Imperial efficiency. "Passing words from the streets have notified me that you were accosted by…Judeans." The naked derision in his pronunciation felt like her skin was being peeled like a potato. "I hope they have not stuffed your ears with fraudulent myths and other worthless conjectures, heh. I have been looking forward to discussing more theories with you."

"No." Visha sighed and moved to close the front door.Dr. Gunther shoved his foot and she pulled the door harder. When his face contorted into a wince, it brought a cruel satisfaction to the White Russy.

"No? NO?!" He frowned immediately. "You dare-"

"I am not interested in more theories. Not today, at least." The White Russy mustered her inner Tanya voice to speak reason. "I…wish for a moment of solitude to meditate."

"You have been in solitude and meditating for far too long! The vermin that infested Germania-"

"LEAVE!" Her voice interrupted into thunder, with such power Visha believed that the Major would have been proud. "I care not anymore! Do not come anymore."

Dr. Gunther's face lost all its earnest warmth in an instant. Naked hatred, the cold machinations of hierarchy and purity that existed in his heart, revealed itself in terrifying rage.

"I thought you would be the one to redeem your pathetic race into something majestic. But it seems that my initial conclusion was correct all along. Your people are an irredeemable scourge of Europe. You will never be civilized like us Germanians. You Yid! You Yid in human skin! The Whore of Judea!"

With that, Visha delivered a soft kick to his knee, sending the professor to hop on one leg in terrible pain.

"My allies in Berun will hear of this!" He shouted through the wood and glass when the door finally slammed shut to his face. "You will regret betraying the Fatherland! You will regret betraying Argent Silver!"

Ignore him. Came the voice of Tanya, soft yet stern, with all the caress of a true friend and lover. *It is not him you should be fighting for.*

The White Russy collapsed onto the couch, her face aimed high at the ceiling, while her eyes wandered lazily around the lights hanging above.

"Who am I fighting for?" she whispered.

You are the Daughter of Kieva. Her avenging child against the Red Horde.

Visha shuddered immediately at the treasonous thought. These are not Tanya's words. She was sworn to defend the Tzar. The Russy Empire. Those words reeked of secession. An independent Kieva? What a ridiculous concept. She is Russy. Her parents are Russy. Her family is Russy. They fought, bled, and worked for the security and prosperity of the Russy Empire.

You speak the tongue of Kieva. Your true tongue.

The Cossack looked to her side and found the image of Tanya sitting beside her. The brunette's head resting on ethereal pale thighs. Visha imagined immediately that her brown hair was being groomed by the Major and the sight strangled her heart over past regrets.

"I've gone mad." Visha muttered in trance. "The Major would never brush my hair nor would I not be a Malorussy."

Malorussy. *Little Russy.* All the Kievans that embraced the superior Russy culture, language, faith, and imperial law. The language of Kieva was banned in the time of her grandfather yet

Kievan continued to be spoken within the walls of her family's estate, safe from the prying eyes and eyes of the Tzar's watchmen. A tradition still kept in Germania, even after Visha left.

Her own mind has run amok. Her imagination radicalized.

Yet, is that not the consequence of being the most devout of Argent Silver? The most natural conclusion.

After all, the current Tzar is weak. Though a good man, he is powerless and dependent on the whims of lesser men. Traits most unbecoming and unworthy of a Tzar. To subject Kieva to the rulership a weak man would be just as cruel and wicked as allowing her homeland to fallow and burn under the Bolsheviks.

What was it that Argent Silver spoke of in her manifesto?

Self-Determination?

Kieva served the Tzars faithfully for 300 years. Perhaps it is time for Kieva to serve itself.

Just as it was time for Visha to serve herself.

"No!" Visha sat up immediately, causing the mirage to fade immediately. "I still serve. Kieva still serves. It cannot be for nothing! Don't let it be for nothing."

Argent Silver spoke of Freedom as a brilliant and noble trait but failed to mention how terrifying it could be. Emancipation can very well just be Exile.

Perhaps I am fretting over nothing. One crisis at a time, Visha. Remember your purpose here.

Perhaps focus on a different subject…no.

Return to the original question.

Who is Tanya to the cossack?

A hero? A mentor? A partner? A lover?

Whatever the case it may be, Viktoriya should at least perform one final task.

"I inflicted many grievances upon you, Tanya." She turned her head to speak to the nutcracker. "For that, I am sorry. Father Schugel promised you a weapon of unimaginable power and it is only fitting that I shall work to ensure its success. For you deserve that much."

“**No.**" The nutcracker refused. "**It is not her you should be fighting for.**"

"It is you."

"It is you."

"Take the power as your own and deliver the Lord's Judgment upon her."

"Not me." The cossack cried out immediately, clutching at her head. She felt her thoughts growing not as her own. "Not me. I cannot do it. It cannot be me. This has to be my imagination! This isn't real."

"You will." The voice spoke louder and with such force the walls and windows seemed to bend under the strain of God's presence. Even her skull felt like it was pressed between two weights. **"You will!"**

Deus lo Vult.

Who are you to deny the Lord's command?

"Deus lo Vult." Visha wept lightly, surrendering to her faith in the Lord. "Forgive me, Tanya. At least it will be by my hand."

Author's Note: The Plot Accelerates.

Chapter Forty-Five: Elena Ascendant

Contrary to conclusions drawn by the foreign observers, the political battlelines were not as concrete on the ground as they were on a map. Rozaleine Luetzebuerg knew this well when she drove to Berun. It was, after all, everyone's city: Conservatives, Socialists, Liberals, Progressives, Fascists, Volkists, and even the dreadful Rohrites. The latter dared to rebrand themselves as National Socialists in an autocentric attempt to usurp the Communist Party of Germania as the party vanguard of the workers' revolution. Rohr's ego was wider than his body, that wicked oaf. If it weren't for the Degurechaffites being an inconvenience in her operations in Thuringia and Hanover, her party could have crossed the Kassel Barrier and crushed the Brownshirts in Bavaria.

Hence, it was crucial to meet with a mole from the capital. One that she had planted among the Reichsführerin's women since the formation of the KSA. Whether out of delusion or from an opportunistic turncoat, the information the agent gave her about the various far-right and centrist paramilitary organizations was immense. Now, this spy had promised some valuable intelligence on KSA's troop movements, strongholds, and the means to infiltrate them. And of course, to shield themselves from the all-seeing eye of Executioner Elena, the contact even went for the most audacious plan: a meeting in the largest queer cabaret of Berun in Motzstraße.

Rainbow flags depicting the Black Cross or the Black Dragon hung in rhythmic equidistant on every side of the wall facing the streets. The loyalties of its establishment are clear: this was Hell and all the demons owe their allegiance to the Devil. At least until now, when the middlemen, communist sympathizers according to her contacts, greeted her from the door and led her inside.

Luetzeberg was a revolutionary through and through but even she considered herself heteronormative. Queer men with queer men, lesbians with lesbians, and trans men and women exploring each other's desires. The carnal intimacy was appalling to her sensibilities. Sure, she was older than the new generation of working youth but the Marxist theorist would never have imagined that social clubs in Berun would operate in such a manner.

Inside, the jazz performers danced in random movements that only seemed to follow the music's rhythm. Their golden cabaret costume seemed to bounce the light that must have been from stained glasses switching colors after a certain interval; she averted her gaze before she could think of interpreting who the performers were. Her quick gaze of the crowd also did not give her any tangible clue of the many patrons' genders. An earlier incident where she was accosted by a tall, definitely ladylike Diana figure who brandished her cane and leered at her, saying, "Want to be my slave?" reminded her that she could be pulled by whatever machinations this alien world has. Did they really pay that woman that much? She gave a wide berth from a roguish 'man' whose sparkling eyes creeped her by their demure intensity.

Sex could be heard incessantly from the farthest reaches of the cabaret; the cacophony of physical pleasure awakened both panic and morbid curiosity in Luetzeberg. The music seemed

to amplify this experience. It almost reminded the woman of her passionate love life with her fellow Communist revolutionary and husband. Never in a thousand years did she find herself agreeing with the Conservative establishment that Germania had lost its mind after the Great War, yet here she was, in the epicenter of madness.

Most damning of all were the nude portraits and statues of the Devil on the Rhine, depicting the Empire's greatest soldier as if she were Aphrodite reborn, in various positions of intimacy. Was it to humiliate Argent Silver? Their behavior made it seem unlikely, given how many of her memoirs lay scattered across the tables.

Each work of art was more scandalous than the rest. Each one more sensual and evocative, as if they were made to draw out the soul of the viewer through his eyes. There were a couple that also made it seem that Degruechaff was staring back at her, some invitingly, some accusingly, some she was not sure how to feel about. The more Luetzeberg stared, the more she approached the dreadful conclusion that these idols of Argent Silver were, in fact, not markers of disdain but of worship.

Reverence of the Devil. Reverence for her virtues and her defiance.

They were denied Heaven. They had survived Hell. And so they made Earth their paradise.

What would Degurechaff say if she saw this? Would she even notice?

This perverted gallery was tucked away as if it were a private shrine to the most fanatical and debauched of her followers. A clear indication that the proprietor knew that most of Germanian society was not yet ready for a Sex Revolution. At least this area was noticeably cleaner and smelled of roses and lavender.

After her eyes and ears were assaulted by more carnal pleasures, Luetzeberg finally arrived in a private theatre reserved for more opulent patrons. Over a hundred guests were wearing their finest clothes and the most gaudy of jewelry, sipping the most expensive wine, all while lewdly-dressed waitresses served their every whim with the meekness of a trained rabbit.

Luetzberg almost wished the meeting had been conducted somewhere more respectable, as her drab attire would have blended better with the riff-raff that was her fellow proletariat. She almost desired to simply postpone the meeting entirely. Especially considering how the extravagant display of wealth inequality disgusted her more than the paintings of Degurechaff. For her sanity, the spy better have good intel on the KSA.

Compared to the premiere stage at the front of the cabaret, the atmosphere was more muted, though no less wanton. With a sigh, Lutzberg took the seat at the designated meeting point. True to the spy's word, the entire table was reserved for her. Hopefully, the turncoat was seated on the other side of the curtain that divided the two tables.

The second the Communist found her comfort, she heard the code phrase spoken through the cloth.

Freedom is the ability to say two plus two equals four.

The voice sounded familiar. Too familiar. Regardless, Luetzberg played her part.

Freedom is the ability to say two plus two equals five.

One excruciatingly long second passed before the feminine voice was heard again.

"I hope the experience of Kabarett Dégure Chaff was amusing."

Luetzberg snorted, trying to bury the dread that rose from her stomach. "It certainly lives up to its name." Despite the cold wine being served, she opted not to partake in any beverage here.

"The drinks are not poisoned." The voice remarked. "I made sure of that."

"Thanks for the notice." Luetzberg frowned, "But I am more interested in your recent endeavors. If you cannot provide what you promised, then I will take my leave."

"Do not fret, Roza," the female contact replied. "I was merely trying to settle you in."

Before the old revolutionary could reply, a distinct ringing of the bell could be heard right behind the curtain. In an instant, Luetzberg bore witness to every waitress, patron, and stage performer halt in their movement in synchronized silence before departing immediately. Within ten seconds, the entire restaurant was empty.

A white-gloved hand brushed aside the barrier, revealing a young woman with eyes and hair as brown as dirt. Her black uniform gave her a sharp figure and her peaked cap bore the Totenkopf sigil. On her right shoulder was a yellow armband that contained the Black Dragon.

"Bottstein…" Luetzberg breathed in deeply, closing her eyes for a moment of cruel acceptance. "You're the turncoat? Whose side are you actually on?"

"The name is Elena Muller." The softness of the Reichsführerin dissipated in favor of a sterile, foreboding tone. "I thought I made sure you knew that when I shot your husband and performed a late-stage abortion on your daughter."

Roza Luetzberg's wrinkled hand immediately covered her own womb. Her little Julia…

"Am I to die here?" The elder Marxist inquired.

"No. You are more useful to me alive than dead." Elena Muller remarked, passing over a folder almost playfully. "The next federal election is occurring in less than two years. Your job is to make sure it does not happen."

Silently, Luetzberg flipped it over and reviewed the contents. True to Muller's word, it contained the latest battleplans of the Waffen-KSA, down to the last detail. Every officer's name was given. Every type of rifle was labeled. Every storehouse and bastion was marked. In addition, the Spartakus Army would be given 60,000 rifles, 3,000 machine guns, and 2,000 machine pistols in preparation for a communist revolt in Western Germania. In any other circumstance, the information was worth more than gold but for the very leader of the Degurechaffian movement to give it away so brazenly, it reeked of treachery. There was too much information revealed.

"Why?" she muttered.

"They're not my followers getting shot on the streets." Muller answered.

"They are your allies."

"True. And they are more useful to me dead than alive. Revolutions are built on the bones of martyrs after all."

Wordlessly, Luetzberg stored the folder in her coat.

"What is stopping me from leaking our conspiracy to the press?" She asked the brunette.

"Simple: no one will believe you when your party gains so much from our arrangement." Muller stared. "And you wouldn't want to perpetuate the claim that Judeans are inherently insidious, do you? No…"

"You realize you are giving us the means to take power by force?"

"Of course, I want you to. I want you to try. Above all else, the Weimar Republic must die. If you can't do it, then I will have to assist the Brownshirts to lead the revolt against the state. And you wouldn't want that, do you? You know what happens when the SA get their hands on Judeans."

Elena Muller was right. Rohr was the worst alternative. The thought made her feel like her saliva was ink. At least Luetzberg could take pride that her party, her movement, in the end was for the welfare of all Germanian citizens, regardless of background. At least her ideology was grounded in compassion for the fellow worker rather than the bigoted outlook of lumpenproletariat Rohrism. At least she was a prime and proper intellectual to educate and enlighten the oppressed peoples of Europe.

Yet, here she was. Just another pawn in the game. Did Elena Bottstein consider herself a piece on the board as well? Or did she imagine herself as the player?

Executioner Elena proclaimed that she speaks for the Devil on the Rhine but Luetzberg felt that it was, at best, a half-truth. If Degurechaff really aspired to coup the republican government, she would have already conquered Berun rather than being exiled to Yugoslavia. The Devil had the men, the loyalty, and the popularity. Something was not adding up.

Did Bottstein go rogue? Luetzberg pondered before banishing the thought immediately. It was much easier to consider everything as a long, Machiavellian scheme to usurp power.

"My name is MULLER." The brunette growled softly, as if she could read the Marxist's thoughts. "Remember that well. I will repay it with a quick and painless death once all our affairs have been concluded."

"If my defeat is inevitable, why not just kill me already and be done with it all?"

"You really do not understand? I want you to try to defeat Degurechaff. I want you to be the monster that the oligarchs claim you are. I need you to be a threat to justify her return."

"Say I have done just that." Roza Luetzberg suggested, "What becomes of you if my party is triumphant and the Workers' Republic of Germania is proclaimed?"

"I move on to greener pastures." Elena sighed softly. "But if you need my services to settle sensitive affairs, I offer a fair rate."

"What are you hoping to achieve? Really?" The elderly woman fumed. "You killed your mother. You killed your father. You killed your baby brother. Now, here you are, passing a suggestion of being a butcher-for-hire, and for what?"

Luetzberg gestured to the opulence around them in blatant disgust.

"To live among sin? To be a whore to the victor? I had always imagined you as just another fanatic who has been seduced by the guileful nature of the Devil on the Rhine but it seems I was wrong with my assessment. You are just another conniving snake in the garden that needs to be expelled."

It makes no sense. Luetzberg read the Devil's memoir herself. Argent Silver believed in democracy. She believed in the Republic. Why would her subordinate detest those ideals? Didn't Elena Bottstein sell herself as the most loyal and worthy of the Degurechaffian Movement? It was also so contradictory unless…

Unless…the book, too, was a ploy to hide the Devil's true intentions and that Elena was merely speaking the quiet part out loud. But that made even less sense.

Perhaps Luetzberg should speak to Degurechaff directly.

"What I want is something that only Argent Silver can give." Executioner Elena replied sternly. "You really want to know? It is everything. Everything"

"And we cannot? You are defending the very people that have put our kind, our communities, under great duress due to their exploitation of our labor." Luetzberg retorted. "Naomi must have been ashamed to have you as a daughter."

Elena's eyes glanced downwards for a second before rising to meet the Red Matriarch's gaze.

"I was ashamed to be her daughter. She was always a weak woman. She and her tribe. I was glad I had found a new calling."

"I will have my revolution, Elena Muller." Luetzberg stood up from her chair. "And I will have you answer for your crimes against the Germanian people. It is the least I could do for Naomi."

"Good luck, Roza." The Reichsführerin called out to her when the old woman vacated the room. "You will need it to face her."

"What do you mean I need to halt all offensives into the West?!" KSA Kommandant Matheus Weiss pinched his nose in growing fury. These phone calls from Elena were testing his patience in the most irksome way. "We have the Kozis on the run. One push into Westphalia and we will have Luetzberg hanging under a lamp post in Essen."

"You think I want you to cease your attacks?!" Elena's voice roared back. "The Brownshirts have pushed north from Franconia and into West Saxony. The Reichsbanner is overwhelmed and Der Stahlhelm refused to reinforce them."

"Has Duerster been compromised?" Weiss questioned, gulping slowly.

"The possibility is not zero. Rohr must be contained. You and your brothers in the 203rd must go and halt his army of thugs and madmen from rampaging to Berun. No one wants a second occupation. I will deliver the most optimal locations to fortify."

Weiss groaned loudly. Every time he and his men achieve a miniscule of success against the Reds, the Nazis come knocking. And every time they leave their battlements to march south to sweep away the National Vanguardists, the Reds counterattack and regain their lost territories. It was an endless game of musical chairs. No progress could be truly gained in the constant shifting of objectives. He could not tell who was the incompetent one in this partnership.

"And what will you be doing?" The veteran mage grumbled.

"Cleaning out my office," Elena replied. A young, feminine plea of mercy could be heard, followed by a gunshot. "The Communists have been extremely aggressive in penetrating my intelligence network with double agents."

Weiss had half a mind to accuse her of telling him a half-truth. If there was one thing Elena was good at, at least according to her lying mouth, it was keeping secrets. Still, her intelligence gathering was always reliable and the data gathered was invaluable in locating and rooting out underground communist cells. Despite everything, this update left a sour taste in his mouth.

If only Victoriya were here. She could hold the entire front against the communists on her own with only a dagger, while he could gather all the Waffen-KSA and its allies and march south to Munich to put that fat swine, Rohr, over a fire.

"I understand," Weiss muttered, pondering Elena's words. "I can only hope that the Major would be satisfied with your leadership."

"Do not fret. I know she will." Her voice was back to its optimistic attitude, which only further raised Weiss' suspicion.

"I think she would be happier if we could actually put down the traitors of the Empire," He replied. "Perhaps we should host another meeting with our allies to remind them of who the real enemies are."

"I will consider it." She spoke in a tone that meant no before hanging up.

Weiss slammed his phone down in frustration. Oh, if only he were in charge of the movement, but alas, the more he looked into politics, the more it disgusted him. It seems everyone was in denial except the veterans of the 203rd. His mind eventually wandered back to Elena, technically his political equal. But just as the hands and feet of the human body are guided by the brain, his men are fed knowledge by Elena's services and, in turn, send their after-action-reports to her.

Regrettably, there was still the issue of playing the role of the subordinate, but only just. That is perhaps why she did not bother to haggle like a fishmonger when he first half-attempted, half-threatened to usurp her. He merely asked for another wall between their two spheres of influence and she was content to oblige. Weiss really should have pushed for greater concessions.

"Bad work call?" His future bride, Wilhelmina, opened the door to his office, revealing a basket of cheese and grapes to indulge together.

"It is Elena," Weiss complained, his voice somewhat muffled when his chin rested on his hand. "Elena, who thinks she could order me around like she is the Major. Elena, who thinks she is Degurechaff's favorite adjutant when Viktoriya is right there…"

"Maybe because Elena has proven herself to be less volatile to Degurechaff. Viktoriya was highly trustworthy until the November Boycott. The Major's anger could be felt through the pages." Wilhelmina carved a slice of white cheddar to pass onto her lover's hand.

"I still remember that. Back then, Elena was awfully panglossisch when she told me the news that she would take over Viktoriya's duties." Weiss took a bite of the cheese before popping a grape in his mouth.

"Didn't you say that Elena wanted to be Degurechaff's right-hand woman instead of her friend?" Wilhelmina inquired. "It must have been a blessing in disguise."

Weiss nodded before being struck with an epiphany like a bullet to the head.

Elena Muller did want to take over Viktoriya's position in Degurechaff's inner circle. But she did not have the familiarity that the Major would recognize. It was the only barrier that separated Elena from standing next to Degurechaff. So how could someone like her earn Argent Silver's favor? Alternatively, however, how could Argent Silver lose trust in her most faithful companion to such an extent that she would rather uplift a rather unknown outsider as the replacement instead of someone like Weiss?

It would take some great betrayal, a great breach of trust, to sever the bonds forged in blood and fire. A void in Argent Silver's heart that only someone outside, like Elena, could fill. A void that was filled after Freikorps Degurechaff was formally disbanded. For all of that to occur, though, Viktoriya must do something so heinous, so unexpected, that Degurechaff had to question the integrity of her most loyal followers.

An event that could only achieve the scale needed was something like…

The November Boycott.

Weiss' mind immediately fell back to the secret meeting with Zettour that occurred after the Major left for Pullska. Viktoriya was there. And so was Elena.

Elena smiled while her friend spilled out her hatred and vitriol against her myriad of enemies, fictional or otherwise. She smiled when Foerster was brought in. She smiled when Viktoriya was led astray by her naked desire for vengeance.

Weiss soon thought of the Konigsberg Incident. What if that was no accident at all? The Major described it as a misunderstanding of gross proportions in her book, but what if she was right for the wrong reasons?

"I know that look, love." Wilhelmina giggled softly. "You're overthinking things again. Have faith in Argent Silver. Once she returns, everything will be fixed."

"Yes," Weiss muttered slowly, " But she can only fix what her eyes can see and what her hands can touch. I'm only afraid for her."

"Don't be so pessimistic. If she can survive the Great War and Beograd, she can survive anything."

Author's Note: I think we're finally at the apex of the plotline before things start accelerating.